



## DOCTORAL THESIS

### The Word of Life

**A study of the relationship between the doctrines of revelation and redemption, with reference to the theology of John Calvin and contemporary thought concerning speech and action**

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# **The Word of Life**

**A study of the relationship between the doctrines of revelation and redemption, with reference to the theology of John Calvin and contemporary thought concerning speech and action.**

by

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to show that any disconnect between the doctrines of revelation and redemption is unwarranted. Divine communicative action is to enable personal knowledge of God, and this has not only epistemological but also soteriological implications.

A survey of Calvin's understanding concerning the activity of speech, both human and divine, is undertaken first. The role of Scripture in conveying divine speech is discussed and Calvin's concept of accommodation is reviewed.

As communication can only function in particular contexts, it is argued that an appropriate context for divine-human communication is provided in the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. The main contemporary views are considered and a recent major statement of the functional view is summarised and an initial critique offered.

Further objections are then raised to the primacy (or exclusivity) of the consensus view. Also the *imago* is located in the wider framework of biblical theology and Calvin's concept of the *imago* is also examined.

The identity of the covenant-making God is considered and this is done with particular reference to the experience and testimony of Israel. The significance of the notions 'experience' and 'testimony' are examined especially in their relation to knowledge.

The Exodus texts concerning the "revelation of the divine name" are then analysed, which opens up questions about the identity of YHWH, his action and the links with his speech. Some contemporary thinking on the Epistle to the Hebrews is surveyed and this leads to the conclusion that to ignore the speech of YHWH is to render both his identity and action opaque at the very least.

In the context of God's "design plan", human beings are made for relationship with him and divine communicative action is necessary to effect that relationship – bringing both revelation and redemption together.

## Contents

Introduction	5
1 Human and Divine speech – Perspectives from Calvin	8
Divine Speech and Scripture	14
Human and Divine Speech	46
2 A Context for Communication (i)	75
The Image of God in Humanity – an overview	82
A Contemporary Statement – <i>The Liberating Image</i>	96
<i>The Liberating Image</i> – a preliminary assessment	118
3 A Context for Communication (ii)	128
Genesis 1: 26-28 revisited	128
Reading the <i>Imago</i> in context	149
John Calvin and the <i>Imago</i>	197
4 God – Identity and the Role of Testimony	212
Experience and Testimony	220
Speech and Action	225
A Perspective on Knowledge and Testimony	244
God’s Self-authenticating Speech	268
5 God – Identity, Speech and Action	280
The Identity of YHWH - Exodus 3:1-15	292
The Bridging Narrative	305
The Identity of YHWH Revisited - Exodus 6:2-9	310
Name and Identity	315
A New Testament Perspective	326
Conclusion	333
<i>Abbreviations</i>	340
<i>Bibliography</i>	342

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## Introduction

There has been a tendency amongst those who produce volumes of systematic theology – sometimes for the sake of order, or clarity of teaching, or the demands of a syllabus – to deal with the doctrine of revelation and redemption as discrete units of study. This has often meant that any interrelationship between the two doctrines has been minimised or even ignored. A more insidious tendency has been “a bifurcation between the revelation event and the divine identity and the consequent dichotomies between the revelation of God’s creative purposes and that of God’s redemptive purposes.”<sup>1</sup> In view of this tendency, the possibility of the re-integration of the doctrines of revelation and redemption is examined in this study. The approach that is taken is from the perspective of God’s speech, or better, God’s speaking. The reason for this approach is to focus on the use and purpose of speech, in the light of recent research in this area.

First an examination of an influential strand of Christian thought is undertaken to see how the two doctrines have been viewed historically. John Calvin has been selected as an exemplar of the Reformed tradition and his understanding of speech and its function is particularly considered as a perspective on the doctrines under consideration. This investigation encompasses both human and divine speech, as human speech is fundamental to all we know. Also, in the light of Calvin’s emphasis on the “knowledge of God and of ourselves”<sup>2</sup> at the beginning of the *Institutes*, it seems consistent with his method to investigate both. A major theme emerging from this examination is that speaking is relationship-forming, and, more particularly, God’s speech has a soteric function.

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<sup>1</sup> AJ Torrance, *Persons in Communion* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1996) p 58

<sup>2</sup> *Inst* p 35 (1.1.1)

If communication is to happen and relationships are to be formed, there has to be a situation, a context in which this happens. A possible context is the part of God's design plan that is related directly to the formation of humankind in the image of God. A number of ways of understanding that image have been canvassed in the Christian Church and a brief survey explores some of them. The dominant interpretation at present emphasises the functional role given to human beings, the idea of dominion, and a major statement of this view is considered and some preliminary criticisms are raised.

These criticisms are further developed by close attention to the foundational texts concerning the *imago*, and an examination of the use of the concept is undertaken in the wider context of the canon. An overview of Calvin's approach to the doctrine of the *imago* is also included, which, together with the evidence already adduced, leads to the conclusion that a relational understanding of the notion is perfectly viable and provides the context for communication between God and humanity.

Attention is drawn to God's speech especially in terms of his self-testimony about his identity and action. Three areas of enquiry are addressed here: the nature of speech as action, the personal nature of knowledge and the reliability of testimony. The first of these shows that speaking is also doing and that this involves an intentional speech-agent. The second and third develop the idea that knowledge involves commitment and trust on the part of the knower and also confidence in the integrity of the testifier. This is also viewed from a theological perspective as Calvin's understanding of the self-authenticating nature of

Scripture, seen by him as God's speech about himself and his purposes, is considered along with the role of the Holy Spirit in testifying to it.

Finally the scriptural testimony is examined with a particular focus on the Exodus narratives concerning the "revelation of the divine name", with a view to discerning God's self-testimony concerning his nature and purpose in the events recorded and the promises made. To ascertain whether the results of this investigation can be used to characterise God more broadly across the whole canon, a summary of elements of the letter to the Hebrews is undertaken to outline the central issues in that letter, and to compare them with the findings from Exodus.

This study concludes with a brief reflection on the interrelationship between the two doctrines, revelation and redemption, and the significance that God speaking has for both of them.



## Chapter 1

### Human and Divine speech – Perspectives from Calvin

The question, “What is speaking for?” would appear initially to be somewhat ingenuous and simplistic. The answer given to it, however, has far-reaching implications in terms of the respondent’s ontology and epistemology. The same is true theologically – any response to this question has implications for a person’s doctrine of God, of humanity and of revelation and beyond these to his or her understanding of soteriology and eschatology. It should be noticed that in the first place, the question asks not about language but about speech; that is, it is a question not about the system or form of language but about its use, about it as an activity. A classic attempt at analysing and explaining the use of speech was made by Augustine. He maintains that language is an expression of thought enabling the thoughts of a person’s mind to enter the mind of another. He argues that there is a “realm of eternal truth” from which people – because of the way their “being is ordered” – are able to understand and act with “truth and reason”.

Thence we conceive a truthful knowledge of things, which we have within us as a kind of *word*, begotten by an inward speech, and remaining with us after its birth. When we speak to others, we apply the service of our voice or some material sign to this indwelling “word,” in order that by means of a perceptible prompting there may take place in the hearer’s mind something like what remains in the mind of the speaker.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> LCC vol VIII, pp 65&66

Augustine was held in the highest regard by John Calvin;<sup>2</sup> and his notion of speech is similar to Augustine's. He makes clear this similarity when he comments on the following words from the Apostle Paul:

For what person knows a man's thoughts except through the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. (1 Cor 2:11&12 RSV)

Calvin comments that "since speaking is a characteristic mental activity, men convey their thoughts and feelings to each other, so that they come to know each other's minds well." The spirit of a person has exclusive access to the inmost thoughts of that person and there is a "likeness (*similitudine*)" with God's thoughts and his Spirit. However, Calvin is uneasy about making this "similitude" directly applicable to God's speaking so he does not view it as the simple transference of thoughts, rather it requires the special activity of the Holy Spirit, the one who knows "... the purpose and will of God."

On the one hand men understand each other; on the other hand the Word of God is a kind of hidden wisdom, to whose loftiness the weak human mind does not reach. So light shines in darkness, until the Spirit opens the eyes of the blind.<sup>3</sup>

Standing within the tradition of Calvin, Abraham Kuyper makes the same kind of relationship between thought and speech. He sees the connection between God's mind and human minds being made by the medium of God's speech in Scripture. Having reflected on the differences between divine and human life, that, "[I]n God life and thought are united;"

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<sup>2</sup> See ANS Lane, *John Calvin Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1999) pp 38&39 for this judgment

<sup>3</sup> *CNTC vol 9* pp 58&59

as opposed to human life where there is a disconnect between “our speaking without doing; our words without power; our thoughts without working.” He goes on to say,

For this reason it is the *Holy* Scripture; for it was not lost in the unholy tearing asunder of thought and life, and is therefore distinct from writings in which yawns the gulf between words and the reality of life. What other writings lack is in this Book, perfect agreement between the life reflected in the divine thought and the thoughts which the Word begets in our minds.<sup>4</sup>

There is, in each of these theologians, a more complex understanding of speaking, but all three start from the basic idea that speech is integral to communication between persons. As the thought of Calvin is considered in this chapter, further aspects of his view of speaking (and their implications) will be considered.

The topic of this study has been chosen because, at its simplest, the Bible presents us with a speaking God who addresses humanity with a salvific intent. In every generation of Christian believers, the idea has been recognised that God has communicated with human beings in some way, to make known, at the very least, something of the divine nature and purposes. John Calvin has been chosen as an initial discussion partner because he represents a long and influential tradition in theology, which continues to be the focus of a great deal of scholarly activity.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, soundings will be taken across the major genres of Calvin’s corpus. Many in the past have reflected only on the *Institutes* when considering Calvin’s thought as though

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<sup>4</sup> A Kuyper *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans Reprint 1969) pp 57&58; emphasis in the original

<sup>5</sup> Witness the numerous articles and books produced for the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth (2009)

this work presents us with the totality of Calvin's thinking or a summation of all his work. In the past decade, or so, this has been shown to be a false assumption by a number of writers. Richard Muller has argued, for example, that there is a breadth to Calvin's thinking that is missed if study is restricted only to the *Institutes*. This chapter will take up one example, in particular, given by Muller concerning Calvin's teaching on the Mosaic Law. Muller clearly shows that to restrict one's investigation of Calvin's understanding of the Law to the *Institutes* is to ignore over ninety pages of exposition concerning the use, sanctions and promises of the Law found in his commentary on the *Harmony of the Last Four Books of Moses*.<sup>6</sup> One example of the function of human speech used in this chapter will be the ninth commandment and the way Calvin explains it in his sermons, commentaries, and the *Institutes*. A further reason for the selection of the particular texts examined is that these are texts on which Calvin has written at some length concerning the *function* of speech, both human and divine. There are many other places in his works where Calvin states or alludes to the *fact* (for him) that God speaks. Similarly there are many places where the speech of human beings is either noted or to which allusion is made. The texts focussed on in this chapter are some of the major areas where Calvin provides the necessary information to answer the original question, "What is speaking for?"

Finally, before embarking on an investigation of Calvin's thought in relation to this question, a few brief comments need to be made concerning his ontology of Scripture and his hermeneutic. In his *Prefatory Address to King Francis*, which opens the first and subsequent additions of the *Institutes*, Calvin writes:

When Paul wished all prophecy to be made to accord with the analogy of faith [Rom. 12:6], he set forth a very clear rule to test all interpretation of Scripture. Now,

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<sup>6</sup> See CC vol 3 pps 196-289. See also R Muller *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000) p 155

if our interpretation be measured by this rule of faith, victory is in our hands. For what is more consonant with faith than to recognize that we are naked of all virtue, in order to be clothed by God? That we are empty of all good, to be filled by him? That we are slaves of sin to be freed by him? . . . To take away from us all occasion for glorying, that he alone may stand forth gloriously and we glory in him?

. . . we do not read of anyone being blamed for drinking too deeply of the fountain of living water [John 4:14]. On the contrary, those have been harshly rebuked who “have dug for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water” [Jer 2:13]. Besides, what is better and closer to faith than to feel assured that God will be a propitious Father where Christ is recognised as brother and propitiator . . . as we ought to presume nothing of ourselves, so ought we to presume all things of God; nor are we stripped of vainglory for any other reason than to learn to glory in the Lord.<sup>7</sup>

Thomas Torrance comments: “[T]his is a striking statement of the relation between method and content”. He goes on to say,

Hence in the very knowledge of God the movement of faith means that we refer everything to God in accordance with his absolute priority and nothing to ourselves. In other words, here we have laid down right away in the preface of the *Institute*, and indeed to the whole of Calvin’s life-work, the supreme *principle of objectivity* that was to govern all Calvin’s thought in content and method alike.<sup>8</sup>

Again in the *Prefatory Address*, Calvin discounts the accusations of those opposed to reform, and especially those who insist on “custom” as the final arbiter of ecclesiastical and theological disputes by saying that the final authority resides in what God has said. “But

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<sup>7</sup> *Inst* pp 12&13

<sup>8</sup> TF Torrance *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press 1988) p 64

granting error a place in the society of men, still in the Kingdom of God his eternal truth must alone be listened to and observed, a truth that cannot be dictated to by length of time, by long-standing custom, or by the conspiracy of men.”<sup>9</sup> Further, as Calvin will argue later, this authority needs to be expressed in a form that can be accessed in every generation, so as to avoid error. “Then we may perceive how necessary was such written proof of heavenly doctrine, that it should neither perish through forgetfulness nor vanish through error nor be corrupted by the audacity of men.”<sup>10</sup> Later in his career, Calvin continues to espouse this view of Scripture. In his commentary on 1 Peter 1:25 he says that Peter,

. . . reminds us that when the Word of God is mentioned, we are very foolish if we imagine it to be remote from us in the air or in heaven, for we ought to realize that it has been revealed to us by the Lord. What then, is this Word of the Lord, which gives us life? It is the Law, the prophets, and the Gospel . . . In short . . . no mention is made here of the Word which lies hidden in the bosom of the Father but of that which has proceeded from his mouth, and has come to us.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that during his lifetime, Calvin continued to consider Scripture to be the place where God is heard and in it is what God has chosen to communicate.

In a recent discussion of the doctrine of Scripture, Timothy Ward argues for the interrelationship between ‘properties’ and ‘use’ when a personal speech agent stands behind a text; and therefore,

. . . the particular theological use of the Bible as supreme authority in Christian life and theology is based on the further claim that it has the properties not just of a personal speech act but of a divine personal speech act. Again use follows from

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<sup>9</sup> *Inst* p 23

<sup>10</sup> *Inst* p 72, 1.6.3

<sup>11</sup> *CNTC* vol 10 p 254

convictions about textual properties. Doctrines of Scripture, making as they do statements about the properties and consequent appropriate uses of Scripture, are therefore necessary in theological and ecclesial life. They demonstrate to Christians as well as to others that our use of the Bible ought not to be merely arbitrary, determined by the inherited biblical practices of our particular community. Our use of the Bible must instead be continually reformed, so that we read it and interpret it as it determines.<sup>12</sup>

Without labelling Calvin anachronistically as a speech act theorist, his view, as seen from the quotations above, fits well with the view of the nature and use of Scripture suggested by Ward. Calvin saw clearly the need “to root the use of the text in the properties of the text.”<sup>13</sup> To seek an answer to our original question, concerning the purpose or function of speaking, this chapter will first examine some important elements of Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture, focussing particularly on his use of the principle of accommodation and understanding of the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit. After exploring some of Calvin’s texts relating to the use of speech, both human and divine, some preliminary conclusions will be drawn.

## **Divine Speech and Scripture**

Calvin’s conviction that God’s speech in Scripture remains the living and active voice of God to subsequent generations is implicit in the comment on 1 Peter 1:25 quoted above. The same idea is asserted elsewhere, for example, in the *Institutes*:

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<sup>12</sup> T Ward, *Word and Supplement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002) p 300

<sup>13</sup> J Webster, *Holy Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) p 7 n 2. Webster is not referring to Calvin here, but the words are appropriate in describing Calvin’s views.

Scripture is “a special gift where God, to instruct his church, not merely uses mute teachers, but also opens his most hallowed lips.”<sup>14</sup>

“Scripture is from God . . . It has flowed from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men.”<sup>15</sup>

“Now let us hearken to God himself as he speaks to us in his own words.”<sup>16</sup>

The language Calvin uses to speak of God’s continuing communication through Scripture is noteworthy. As Paul Helm says, “Calvin does not often use ‘revelation’ or ‘reveal’ in connection with the Scripture, but instead he employs a variety of expressions such as ‘proclaim’ or ‘declares’ and refers to the Bible as oracles.”<sup>17</sup> Many examples can be adduced for this statement.<sup>18</sup> Occasionally Calvin will say that Scripture proclaims certain things, more often he sees God as the subject of the proclamation or declaration. This is sometime mediated through a human agent such as a prophet but more often is a direct speech-act by a member of the Trinity. An example which brings some of these notions together is found in book 3 and chapter 17 of the *Institutes*, as he discusses whether James and Paul are in conflict over the issue of justification by faith or by works:

If they consider James a minister of Christ, the statement must be so understood as not to disagree with Christ speaking through Paul’s lips. The Spirit declares through Paul’s mouth that Abraham attained righteousness though faith not through works...The same Spirit teaches through James that the faith of both Abraham and of ourselves consists in works, not only in faith.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Inst* p 70, 1.6.1

<sup>15</sup> *Inst* p 80, 1.7.5

<sup>16</sup> *Inst* p 379, 2.8.12, the reference is to the Ten Commandments.

<sup>17</sup> P Helm, *Calvin: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (London: T&T Clark 2008) p 29

<sup>18</sup> See eg. *Inst* p 80, 1.7.5; p 122, 1.13.2; 3.3.15 (proclaims); p 206, 1.16.7; p 469, 2.12.5, p 1178, 4.9.14 (declares)

<sup>19</sup> *Inst* p 814, 3.17.11



The purpose here is not to discuss the validity of Calvin's explanation of this issue but to note an underlying presupposition in his approach to it. As he examines Scripture he sees no contradiction, for example, in saying that Christ is speaking, the Spirit is declaring or that human authors are also involved. In particular, he is willing to say that both Christ and the Spirit speak or declare things through Paul. He speaks of the utterances using the present tense, an indication that they address a contemporary debate. They are not simply a record of a past revelation, they are a present and immediate declaration in Calvin's view.

### *Calvin and the doctrine of Scripture*

It is significant that Calvin did not develop a separate treatise on the doctrine of Scripture in all his voluminous works. This may have been because the doctrine as such was generally undisputed and not the focus of great controversy in his era. The interpretation of Scripture was, on the other hand, a matter of great debate and at the root of many of the disputes in which Calvin was involved. Rather than construct an exhaustive and systematic doctrine of Scripture, Calvin's interest lay elsewhere. He was concerned with the function of Scripture. Peter Opitz refers to a number of images used by Calvin to speak of Scripture (it is a "key", "mirror", "sceptre" and "shepherd's staff" for example); these are, in his view, "carefully chosen to represent the foundational noetic, soteriological and pedagogical functions that Calvin associates with Scripture."<sup>20</sup> But Calvin does not, in Opitz opinion, present an actual doctrine of Scripture. Others echo this judgment. Consequently many Protestant theologians have tried to enlist Calvin as support for their own particular view of Scripture. David Puckett sums up the situation in the following way:

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<sup>20</sup> P Opitz, *Scripture*, in *The Calvin Handbook* HJ Selderhuis ed, p 236

In none of his writings did Calvin articulate a doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible. One must study the matter inductively, piecing together clues from throughout his writing, particularly from the biblical commentaries. Perhaps this explains the divergent views on precisely what his position was.<sup>21</sup>

This assessment is borne out, for example, in Ronald Wallace's book *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, where he ranges across the Calvin corpus to bring the appropriate data together. In three and a half pages, examining *Scripture as the only true source of the knowledge of Christ*, he cites the *Institutes* eight times and refers to at least ten commentaries. Elsewhere Roger Nicole notes over thirty authors who maintain that Calvin believed in the verbal inspiration of the Bible. He also lists nearly thirty authors that do not think Calvin held a doctrine of this kind.<sup>22</sup>

An example of the consensus, previously mentioned, that reaches back through the centuries can be found in Nicholas Healey's assessment of Aquinas' view of Scripture:

The salvific knowledge God intends us to receive is conveyed uniquely through the written witness of the human authors of Scripture. The human authors were instruments of God's communicative will. Since they were personal agents and sought to express in their way the revealed knowledge they alone received, their own intentions and their customary word usage (*modus loquendi*) bear upon the text and must be considered in its interpretation...There can be no going behind the text to reconstruct it in the form of a historical or systematic or spiritual re-presentation that

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<sup>21</sup> D Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1995) p 45 n 5

<sup>22</sup> R Nicole, *John Calvin and Inerrancy* in Gamble vol 6 (New York: Garland 1992) p 275

is somehow more profound or true than the original. The fundamental reason why this is so is that unlike any other writing, God is the primary author of Scripture.<sup>23</sup>

It would seem that the comment of Opitz concerning Calvin and Scripture could, in many ways, be a justifiable description of Aquinas' approach, in that he also attributed "noetic, soteriological and pedagogical functions" to Scripture. Recent research into Aquinas has shown that much of his thought rose from his study of Scripture and his biblical commentaries have become increasingly central to that research. In common with other professional theologians of the thirteenth century, Aquinas was given the title of *magister in sacra pagina*. This meant according to Peter Candler Jr that "his scholarly activity throughout his life was permeated by reflection upon Scripture."<sup>24</sup> The range of his commentary writing is evidenced in the volume *Aquinas on Scripture*, it moves through wisdom literature and prophecy in the OT to the Gospels and Epistles of the NT. In his discussion on the relationship between *sacra doctrina* and *sacra scriptura*, Healey states that Aquinas "often uses the two phrases as if they were almost interchangeable". However he goes on to say that "*sacra doctrina* is not normative, or not in anything like the way scripture is. The teaching of the creeds is fundamental, not because it is a product of the church but because the creedal statements are drawn from scripture."<sup>25</sup> There was for Aquinas, as for Calvin, a tradition concerning the nature of scripture that did not require them to produce a specific and systematic treatise on the doctrine of Scripture. They both exercised their offices in the Church to interpret and defend that traditional approach against false interpretations and deviant views.

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<sup>23</sup> NM Healey, *Introduction* in *Aquinas on Scripture*, TG Weinandy, DA Keating & JP Yocum eds (London: T&T Clark 2005) pp 15&16

<sup>24</sup> P Candler jr, *St Thomas Aquinas*, in *Christian Theologies of Scripture*, JS Holcomb ed (New York New York University Press) p 64

<sup>25</sup> NM Healey, *Aquinas on Scripture*, p 18

To return to Calvin, this lack of a definitive treatment of the doctrine of Scripture has produced a wide variation of opinions in recent interpretation. The evidence has to be garnered from across his whole literary output and this has resulted in various interpreters taking up diametrically opposed positions on certain elements of his doctrine. This study is not the place to attempt any adjudication between the views expressed by contemporary Calvin scholars on his approach to the inerrancy of Scripture, for example. This question does offer, however, a clear illustration of the divergent views that have emerged in recent scholarship. Two examples of this divergence will suffice to make the point. In their major work, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, Jack Rogers and Donald McKim argued that the historic position of the Church on Scripture was that it was considered to be authoritative in matters of faith and practice. Scripture is not, however, thought to be reliable on every area on which it spoke. Rogers and McKim enlist Calvin to evidence this claim. They argue that “Calvin did not think it inconsistent to affirm that the apostles were secretaries of the Holy Spirit and at the same time to note grammatical weaknesses or historical inaccuracies in their writings.”<sup>26</sup> The response to the Rogers and McKim thesis by John Woodbridge reviews much of the same historical evidence and strongly asserts the opposite view, that Calvin and the tradition in which he stood, clearly acknowledged Scripture as inerrant.<sup>27</sup> In a similar way, but with a greater emphasis on Biblical exegesis and theology, Edward A Dowey Jr can assert that, “there is no hint anywhere in Calvin’s writings that the original text contained any flaws at all.”<sup>28</sup> Whereas James Barr, in his book *Fundamentalism*, takes the opposite position, suggesting that Calvin “contemplated with equanimity the dating of some Psalms in the Maccabaeon period...and that his own

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<sup>26</sup> J Rogers and D McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Harper Row p 116

<sup>27</sup> J Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1982)

<sup>28</sup> E Dowey, *The knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1994)p 100

inclination was to believe that II Peter was not written by the apostle Peter” and furthermore, “Matters of discrepancies between texts, minor contradictions and so on were taken very easily.”<sup>29</sup> The opinion expressed by Charles Partee on this situation, that “. . . such sharply differing interpretations of Calvin’s view of the Bible suggests that Calvin did not develop a doctrine of Scripture at all – at least of the kind that deals with modern questions,”<sup>30</sup> underlines that judgment made above. Further, Partee says that, “. . . while Calvin’s *use* of Scripture is massive, his analysis of its *nature* is slight.”<sup>31</sup>

All of this does not mean that Calvin does not have a doctrine of Scripture at all. It shows rather that he is not addressing questions that 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century theologians are asking. It is commonplace amongst contemporary writers of systematic theologies to deal with the doctrine of scripture or revelation first.<sup>32</sup> This is not how Calvin proceeds; he talks of both the inspiration of Scripture by the Holy Spirit and of the testimony of the Spirit to its authority. Richard Muller comments that these “...two principles... around which the debate turns occur at the opposite ends of the Institutes.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Calvin embeds his whole discussion of these themes in a Trinitarian framework, taking up “. . . the distinctive Western and Augustinian doctrine of the Trinity, which [he] accepted and utilized fully, with its concept of the double procession of the Spirit.”<sup>34</sup> It is this Trinitarian framework that gives Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture its particular shape, according to Muller.

The Father manifests himself through the Son, while the Father and the Son together work by the Spirit who proceeds from them. Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture mirrors

<sup>29</sup> J Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London SCM Press 1981)pp 173&174

<sup>30</sup> C Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* ( Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2008)p 58

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, p 61

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, the volumes by H Berkhof, W Grudem, OC Thomas & EK Wondra, and O Webber in the bibliography.

<sup>33</sup> RA Muller, *The Foundations of Calvin’s Theology: Scripture as Revealing God’s Word* in RC Gamble ed, *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism* vol 6 p 401

<sup>34</sup> *ibid* p 406

exactly this operation: Scripture is produced by the inspiration of the Spirit who testifies to our hearts of the truth and authority of his words. By the Spirit we recognize Scripture to be the Word and the Wisdom of God the Father given *to us* in a form we can apprehend; and by the Spirit we are drawn to find in Scripture the Gospel of Christ, the essential Word of the Father given *for us*.<sup>35</sup>

This concentration on the sub-structure of the doctrine of Scripture, and on the function of Scripture itself, means for Calvin that he does not attempt to prove the worth or authority of it from external sources. The Scriptures are self-authenticating because of their unity with and inseparability from the Holy Spirit.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Inspiration***

Richard Muller's proposal concerning Calvin's view of Scripture – concerning the Holy Spirit's inspiration of, and testimony to, Scripture – needs some development and substantiation. The inspiration of Scripture by the Holy Spirit is clearly evidenced (in both explicit and implicit ways) according to Calvin and there is a close link, indeed an inextricable link between the two.<sup>37</sup> There is no doubt that he thinks that, from the beginning to the end of Scripture, God is clearly portrayed as speaking by the Holy Spirit through human authors. Without the Spirit's work of inspiration there would be no body of Scripture available to humanity. In the following quotations, selected examples are offered from the major divisions of the Bible. Commenting on the Pentateuch, Calvin says of Moses when he was given the tablets of the Law (Exodus 31 & 32)

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid*, emphasis in the original

<sup>36</sup> See the comments by IJ Hesselink in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* ed D Mc Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004) pp 80&81

<sup>37</sup> This can be seen not only from the texts that follow but from many used in the section *Human and Divine Speech* below.

With this object he was taken up into the sanctuary of heaven (*adytum*), as it were, in order that he might familiarly learn all things that concerned the full and complete understanding of the Ten Commandments, since he could never have attained their genuine meaning if God had not been his master and teacher. Hence we gather that he wrote his five books not only under the guidance of the Spirit of God, but as God himself had suggested them, speaking to Him out of His own mouth.<sup>38</sup>

Here, clearly, Calvin sees that Pentateuch as a product of inspiration, coming from God, through the Holy Spirit to the human author, Moses. This pattern is repeated in the Prophets, where, for example, Ezekiel, when speaking of the judgment of God “sets God before them, by which he means that he was not the author of the threats, but spoke only from the mouth of God, as the organ of the Spirit.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the prophet Amos speaks under the guidance of the Spirit to reveal and condemn the mind-set of the Israelites. Calvin comments, “. . . as the Prophet possessed the discernment of the Holy Spirit, he penetrated into their hearts and brought out what was hid within.”<sup>40</sup> Writing on the New Testament statement concerning the Prophets (2 Peter 1:21), Calvin reinforces this link when he says, “. . . they dared nothing of themselves but only in obedience to the guidance of the Spirit who held sway over their lips as in His own temple.”<sup>41</sup> Concerning the third section of the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Psalms, Calvin makes it clear that what applies to the Prophets, applies here as well, even the “histories” are included.<sup>42</sup> There is in Calvin’s mind no great difference between the process of inspiration in both the Old and New Testament, in that “. . . the only thing granted to the apostles was that which the prophets had had of old.”<sup>43</sup> The task of the

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<sup>38</sup> CC vol 3, p 328

<sup>39</sup> CC vol 11, p 213

<sup>40</sup> CC vol 14, p 323

<sup>41</sup> CNTC vol p 344

<sup>42</sup> See *Inst* pp 1153&1154, 4.8.6

<sup>43</sup> *Inst* p 1155, 4.8.8

New Testament authors was “. . . to expound the ancient Scripture and to show that what is taught there has been fulfilled in Christ.”<sup>44</sup> This, however, is not done on their own initiative or authority as, “. . . they were not to do this except from the Lord, that is, with Christ’s Spirit as precursor in a certain measure dictating the words.”<sup>45</sup> In Calvin’s view,

This is the principle that distinguishes our religion from all others, that we know that God has spoken to us and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak of themselves, but as organs of the Holy Spirit uttered only that which they had been commissioned from heaven to declare. All those who wish to profit from the Scriptures must first accept this as a settled principle, that the Law and the Prophets are not teachings handed on at the pleasure of men or produced by men’s minds as their source, but are dictated by the Holy Spirit.<sup>46</sup>

The word in the previous two quotations that has provoked a great deal of discussion (if not controversy) is the word “dictate”. Without entering into this debate it is wise to note the caveat entered by Richard Muller, “This high doctrine of inspiration must not be separated from Calvin’s equally strong emphasis on the accommodated character of God’s revelation.”<sup>47</sup> While Calvin wishes to assert that inseparability of Word and Spirit, he also seeks to maintain the mediated nature of the Word. The Spirit uses human agents so that “. . . its revelation is couched in terms accessible to the human intellect ...to the situation and needs of the recipients.”<sup>48</sup>

### ***Calvin and Accommodation***

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid*

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

<sup>46</sup> CNTC vol 10, p 330

<sup>47</sup> R Muller, *Foundation of Calvin’s Theology* p 401

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*



The growing body of literature on the subject of accommodation cannot be reviewed here. For the purposes of this study, the classification of the way Calvin uses the concept in different contexts, as suggested by Paul Helm, will be followed.<sup>49</sup> There is first what Helm calls the *morally indexed sense of accommodation*. This is particularly seen in an historical context where God “at a given time or epoch” accommodates himself to ethical issues concerning the people of Israel. The example that he uses (taken from the work of David F Wright) is from Deuteronomy 21:10-13, which concerns the laws regulating marriage to women who had been taken captive. Commenting on this type of accommodation, Helm says that, “...in these passages the sovereign God is shown to have another side. God limits himself in his relation to Israel.”<sup>50</sup>

The second category suggested by Helm is that of *human accommodation*. Here the human-divine relationship is in view, and Calvin is concerned with the accommodation that human beings must make in the light of the nature and demands of God.

The final category is what may be called *revelational accommodation*. This “...is the sense for which Calvin is best known, the primary sense, in which according to him God accommodates himself to us in speaking of himself.”<sup>51</sup> The classic articulation of this idea is expressed by Calvin in his introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity in the Institutes:

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> P Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004) pp 185&186

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, p 185

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, p 186

<sup>52</sup> *Inst*, p 121,1.13.1

As Helm points out, accommodation is not simply a strategy to circumvent difficulties of a critical or hermeneutical nature. It is, in fact, a concept that impacts much of Calvin's thinking and at root is part of his concept of God – it reflects something of the character and action of God. Jon Balserak puts it in this way:

...there are some thinkers for whom accommodation is merely a notion to which they have recourse when they come upon one of the standard problems for which it is the answer (such as a text which ascribes emotions to God, like Gen 6:5-6). But for Calvin accommodation seems to represent a notion which he associates in a basic way with what God is like; how he acts and why he behaves as he does. Of course Calvin can still employ accommodation as a useful polemic device, but it is clearly much more than that to him.<sup>53</sup>

Accommodation is not, for Calvin, the single hermeneutical key that unlocks the meaning of the whole of Scripture. His primary method is “to unfold the mind of the writer he has undertaken to expound.”<sup>54</sup> This goal he pursued with the tools that were available to him and, as a result of his humanist training, using the original languages he was concerned to see the text in its literary and historical context. David Wright comments on Calvin's hermeneutical method, saying that he “. . . displays a remarkable readiness to read the narratives just as they stand, while agreeing with most earlier and contemporary commentators that the patriarchal misdeeds set no precedent.” Indeed, accommodation is not a device to airbrush out the faults of the patriarchs as Wright goes on to say, “he seems to make little or no use in this context of any forms of accommodation which elsewhere assist him in coming to terms with unpalatable features of the Old Testament.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> J Balserak, *Divinity Compromised* (Dordrecht: Springer 2006)p 186; see also P Helm, *Ideas* p 187

<sup>54</sup> *CNTC* vol 8 p 1

<sup>55</sup> DF Wright, 'Accommodation and Barbarity in John Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries', in *Understanding Poets and Prophets* ed AG Auld (Sheffield JSOT Press 1993) p 415

Contemporary interest concerning the question of accommodation in Calvin was initiated by E.A.Dowey Jr who began his book *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (1952) with a discussion of the topic. The main feature of accommodation is, in Dowey's view, to explain how the incomprehensible God could make himself known to people in their limited capacity to understand. It explains the means whereby the infinite God limits himself to allow finite human beings to grasp some knowledge of his nature, person and work. Following the structure of the *Institutes*, Dowey commented first on the knowledge of God as Creator, and then as Redeemer. H Jackson Forstman argued (in 1962) that Calvin "had a program of demythologization" and for him, "everything carnal and earthly is utterly inappropriate in talking about him[God]." The main tools that Calvin used in this 'program' were figures of speech, such as 'hypotyposis' and 'anthropopatheia', but "Most often, he had recourse to the principle of accommodation; it may justly be said this was the main use he made of this dominant principle."<sup>56</sup> There is a limited affinity with Dowey's approach in that both concern the actions of God, but there is a widely differing assessment of Calvin's use of accommodation.

A different perspective was presented by E David Willis whose paper *Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology* (1970) majored on the use of accommodation as a rhetorical strategy to persuade people. Willis sees Calvin as deeply influenced by his study of classical traditions, especially of rhetoric. This, he argues, can be seen in "three area of his thought." These are "his view of faith as persuasion, of knowledge as efficacious

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<sup>56</sup> HJ Forstman, *Word and Spirit* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1962) pp 113&114

thought and of revelation as God's persuasive accommodation."<sup>57</sup> Of the last of these he says:

Far from maintaining a view of a lofty God who is untouched by human weakness and changeableness, Calvin presents a view of God who as a loving Father strategically adjusts his dealings with people in order to inform, delight and move them (cf. the three classical aims of rhetoric) to doing his will, which represents both his glory and their highest good.<sup>58</sup>

As well as the influence of his classical and legal training, Willis also noted the impact of Calvin's reading of the Church Fathers – and particularly of Augustine – on his views. Although Clinton Ashley produced his PhD thesis in 1972 he makes no mention of the paper by Willis and seems to be entirely dependent on Dowey and Forstman for scholarly interaction. He devotes one chapter out of five to an examination of the use of accommodation in Calvin. His principle conclusion is that its use is mainly for avoiding comment on some of the more difficult passages of Scripture; he states that "the full meaning of these teachings is beyond man's comprehension."<sup>59</sup> He further states that "This principle is Calvin's primary exegetical tool for interpreting Scripture."<sup>60</sup> In 1977 Ford Lewis Battles published a paper on Calvin and accommodation with some affinity to the approaches of both Dowey and Willis. The main emphasis of his essay was on the rhetorical background to the idea of accommodation and that it was what was most influential in Calvin's use of it. Battles did move the debate to a broader canvas, speaking of accommodation as the defining notion in considering God's works. He observes that classically, "Accommodation begins as an apologetical tool against hostile critics of

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<sup>57</sup> ED Willis in Gamble, vol 6 p 50

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*, p 53

<sup>59</sup> C Ashley, 'John Calvin's Utilization of the Principle of Accommodation' unpublished PhD thesis p 119

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*, p 120

Scripture; it ends as a pastoral instrument for the edification of believers.” And for Battles, “these notes are struck in Calvin’s frequent use of accommodation.”<sup>61</sup> The portraits he draws on from Calvin all speak of the condescension of God and this is the model Battles sees in all of God’s speaking and acting and especially, he argues, in the incarnation.<sup>62</sup>

Two other scholars, who have emphasized the rhetorical background of accommodation, are Oliver Millet and Serene Jones. They both see Calvin’s use of it as an outcome of his classical training. Millet argues that Calvin uses the idea of accommodation to overcome the gulf between God as the speaker and sinful humanity as the audience. If it is the majestic nature of God’s speech that is self-authenticating, when we look at the language of the Bible, what we find is, paradoxically, common language, all too human speech. This is God adapting himself to his audience, humanity.<sup>63</sup> As he views Calvin’s approach of accommodation in this way, he harnesses other aspects of the rhetorical tradition to elucidate further Calvin’s position. Similarly Serene Jones wishes to locate Calvin in the rhetorical tradition to explain both his exegesis and application of Scripture. She argues that, “. . . the rhetoric of theology must be persuasive and hence accommodation because God’s own word is inherently persuasive and accommodating.” This particularly means for Calvin that, “. . . human persons come to know God through the revelatory oration that God, as the Grand Rhetorician, speaks to them.”<sup>64</sup>

Stephen Benin’s study of divine accommodation in Jewish and Christian thought, *The Footprints of God*, acknowledges that Christianity inherited the principles of rhetoric from its surrounding context, but he does not emphasize their role in shaping the notion of accommodation. Rather he views it as a major and persuasive tool of exegesis. John

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<sup>61</sup> FL Battles *Interpreting John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1996) p 125

<sup>62</sup> See *ibid* pps 135-137

<sup>63</sup> O Millet, *Calvin et la Dynamique de la Parole* (Paris Librairie Honore Champion 1992)

The previous two sentences are a paraphrase from p 247

<sup>64</sup> S Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1995) p 187

Chrysostom is one of the major proponents of its use in exegesis and, in his view, a significant influence on Calvin. He maintains that,

Calvin... understood all of Scripture through the lens of accommodation because it so perfectly serves his purposes: It strengthened his theological system in asserting the sublimity of the divine and frailty of the human; it placed Scripture front and center as authoritative in religion, and it permitted him to try to establish an unbreakable bond between Scripture and faith by positing one theory for establishing the faith based on correct interpretation.<sup>65</sup>

Although approaching the question of accommodation from a somewhat different perspective to many of the other writers mentioned, Benin sees the issue very much in terms of the form of Scripture and as a hermeneutical approach to it.

A number of essays have been written by David Wright that open up new perspectives on this issue. His first contribution was to investigate the way that Calvin used accommodation in his commentaries. This was an important step as much of the previous writing on the subject had majored on the *Institutes* with an occasional example taken from the Commentaries or Sermons. The focus of his first essay was on the commentary on Exodus to Deuteronomy that Calvin had arranged as a ‘harmony’, to bring like topics together, rather than following a chronological sequence. Wright points to a number of instances where Calvin employs the principle of accommodation to show that God is dealing with “the passions and lusts of his rude people.” And he does this in such a way as to demonstrate “his malleability, even his vulnerability” to those passions.<sup>66</sup> These concessions by God are on account of the hardness of the people’s hearts and are a clear indicator of God’s own accommodation of his speech. As Wright says,

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<sup>65</sup> S Benin, *The Footprints of God* (Albany: SUNY Press 1993) p 192

<sup>66</sup> DF Wright, *Calvin’s Pentateuchal Criticism* in RC Gamble vol 6 p 226

This God of Calvin's pentateuchal criticism is at one and the same time utterly sovereign (not least in his knowledge of his rude people's hearts and ways) and self-limiting in his teaching and leading of his people... that is to say – and the assertion requires due emphasis to eliminate all possible misunderstanding – however sharply Calvin adduces concession to the *puerilitas* of Israel in explaining the details of pentateuchal legislation, it by no means follows that the laws of Moses are nothing more than ad hoc or rather *ad hominen*, compromises so relativized by their adaptation to the condition of ancient Israel as to have no continuing purpose in God's revealed wisdom for his people now as well as then.<sup>67</sup>

The point of these concessions, rather "...were intended by God to point to Christ or to teach ...basic principles of true religion and godly living."<sup>68</sup>

In a later paper, *Calvin's "Accommodation" Revisited*, Wright points out that, "One of the images Calvin uses is that of a father condescending to his children." This is not to be seen in only one arena, that of Scripture, but, "Such an image is applicable to the whole grand sweep of God's adopting our humanness – of speech, of mental capacity of flesh itself – to communicate himself to us humans."<sup>69</sup> Wright also wants to add a threefold differentiation concerning Calvin's use of accommodation, in that he sees in Calvin that "it addresses first human beings *qua* finite creatures, secondly human beings *qua* sinners and thirdly Israel as a primitive ethnos."<sup>70</sup> This more nuanced understanding of accommodation does not imply any reduction in Calvin's estimate of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. He wishes to hold together both the humanity and divinity of Scripture. "The accommodated character of

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<sup>67</sup> *ibid*, p 229

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*

<sup>69</sup> Wright, 'Accommodation Revisited' in P De Clerk *Calvin as Exegete* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Studies Society 1995) p 178

<sup>70</sup> *ibid*

the presentation of God's revelation in Scripture does not militate against that Scripture's being wholly what God designed it to be." Indeed, for Wright, Calvin had "a more highly developed (accommodating?) sense of the co-habitability of divine and human in the undivided house of Scripture than most modern visitors."<sup>71</sup> The major impact of Wright's work has been to raise questions about the two main assumptions concerning accommodation in Calvin scholarship. These may be summarized as: first, his use of this concept derives from his classical studies (including the Church Fathers) especially the study and use of rhetoric. Secondly, he used accommodation as his key hermeneutical strategy. These two assumptions are not mutually exclusive, but they can be, and have been, contested. In the case of the assumed use of accommodation as an "inherited" principle of rhetoric, it is inadequate according to Wright as,

The main reason why this cannot be the case is simply that there is no close equivalent in Roman rhetorical theory to Calvin's (or for that matter the leading Fathers) use of accommodation. The rhetoricians certainly worked with criteria of aptness (*aptum*) and propriety (*decorum*), whereby an orator adjusted what he said to his audience, the occasion, his subject matter and intention, and so on. Quite apart from the absence of distinctive terminology, this is light years away from the range and depth of Calvin's applications of accommodation.<sup>72</sup>

Neither this nor any other assumption "...at the present moment can claim an uncontested authority," according to Jon Balserak.<sup>73</sup> This is certainly true of the second assumption suggested above. While it would be unrealistic to deny that Calvin was a man of his time

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p 180

<sup>72</sup> D Wright, 'Calvin's Accommodating God' in *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex* (KJirksville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers 1997) p 16

<sup>73</sup> J Balserak, *Divinity Compromised* p 9



and free from any influence of education and context, his intention in his commentaries on Scripture, for example, is best expressed in his own words.

Since it is almost his only task to unfold the mind of the writer whom he has undertaken to expound, he misses the mark, or at least strays outside his limits by the extent to which he leads his readers away from the mind of his author.<sup>74</sup>

This approach can be attributed, of course, to his humanistic training – the impetus to go *ad fontes* – but it also motivated by the desire to give due “respect for the Word of God.”<sup>75</sup> In striving to do this Calvin uses the intellectual tools at his disposal, these are provided for him by his earlier training. This training “. . . presses him to understand the preliminary identification of the *argumentum*, *dispositio*, *scopus* or *methodus* of a text was integral to the work of interpretation.”<sup>76</sup>

The study of Calvin and accommodation by Jon Balserak has the intriguing title of *Divinity Compromised*, because he feels the question needs to be raised concerning “. . . the extent of accommodation’s penetration into Calvin’s doctrine of God.” It is not simply a hermeneutical strategy. His purpose is “. . . to suggest the idea that Calvin’s thinking on accommodation might possess qualities which push against traditional thinking on the divine attributes.”<sup>77</sup> One of the benefits of this study is that the theme of accommodation is pursued through a wide range of Calvin’s writing, not exclusively based on the *Institutes*. Balserak’s main chapters locate Calvin and his views within the wider tradition and then turn to a detailed study of the ways in which the capacity of humankind is limited. This is followed by an examination of the response of God to this whole range of limitations and

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<sup>74</sup> *CNTC* vol 8 p 1

<sup>75</sup> *ibid* p 3

<sup>76</sup> R Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* pp 28&29. See also J Van Vliet, *Children of God* pps 164-166 and JT Billings, *Calvin, Participation and the Gift* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007) pps 26-36

<sup>77</sup> J Balserak, *Divinity Compromised* p ix

shows the extent to which God accommodates himself. A further chapter is devoted to the way Calvin presents the reasons for this accommodation by God. In this, “. . . he betrays a willingness to speculate on these matters which many today would consider uncharacteristic of him.”<sup>78</sup> He then moves to a particular aspect of accommodation as he examines it in relation to Calvin’s thinking on the power of God, especially the distinction generally made between the *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*. In sum, Balserak suggests that, “Calvin . . . seems to believe that when God was ordaining the laws and decrees of the present providence, he was accommodating these laws and decrees to the capacity of humankind.”<sup>79</sup> Finally he examines what he calls “The Volatility of Accommodation” and here the purpose is to examine whether Calvin’s use of accommodation erodes the authority of Scripture; and also to see if God’s authority is undermined by the use of the concept,

. . . in his exegesis of the Old Testament Law. . . by wrongly justifying the non-applications of divine injunctions to the New Testament church on the ground that these injunction had been drafted in accommodation to the obduracy of the Jews and were, therefore, no longer applicable.<sup>80</sup>

As Balserak’s work is the only book-length study available on this topic, it is worth summarizing his overall conclusion. The seven major points raised are listed below:<sup>81</sup>

1. Accommodation was part of the tradition that Calvin inherited, but not only was Calvin prepared to deviate from accepted readings, also “...the range and sophistication of his treatment of the idea outstripped that of many of his predecessors and contemporaries.”

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid*, p 101

<sup>79</sup> *ibid*, p 162

<sup>80</sup> *ibid*, p 183

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*, pps 185-187. All quotations are taken from these pages

2. The breadth of Calvin's discussion is far wider than that of most authors – the only possible exception is Chrysostom. It ranges across many aspects of the nature and activity of God.
3. Calvin's use of the notion also impacts his anthropology. Accommodation is necessary because of the hardness and dullness of the human heart.
4. Such is the breadth of Calvin's use of accommodation that "...it is probably best to think of it as a collection of closely-linked practices or concerns touching on a range of disciplines." This means that approaches that major on one aspect are inevitably inadequate, for example, those that simply recognize Calvin as a "rhetorical theologian".
5. Calvin had a tendency to speculate upon God's reasons for a particular instance of accommodation, when the text offered none, or any warrant for doing so.
6. There is a depth of penetration with Calvin's approach to accommodation that influenced his whole theology. It is not merely a means of resolving difficult issues presented by the biblical text. Rather it "...seems to represent a notion which he associates in a basic way with what God is like, how he acts and why he behaves as he does."
7. The effect of this penetration results "... in different images of God being found in Calvin's thought." Often these images are in tension with one another, for example, the majesty of God and his apparent inability to combat wickedness.

Overall one must conclude from Balserak's work that accommodation is an essential part of Calvin's theology rather than one element of his methodology. In summarizing the issue of the tension noted above Balserak states that

. . . considering these disparate images of Calvin's accommodating God, we can say that (1) these images are probably not irreconcilable; (2) they are consistent with the general character of Calvin's theology; and (3) the tension in them is often the product, not so much of the biblical text, but of his own mind and method.<sup>82</sup>

In a similar vein, David Wright can say, "Condescension is the hallmark of all the dealings that God the transcendent has had with humanity. . . [Calvin] presents it in diverse forms as God's way of coping, in his self-disclosure and redeeming work, with the finite capacities and perverse propensities of humanity."<sup>83</sup>

One final approach to the notion of accommodation needs to be reviewed as it moves the discussion in a somewhat different direction to those already considered – this is the view of Paul Helm. In discussing language about God he says,

. . . few reflective theologians have maintained that *all* language about God is used literally, or negatively, or metaphorically. It is usually reckoned that metaphor, analogy, simile and symbol each have an important place in any full developed account of theological language, but that all such language must be 'anchored' in a core of univocally true expressions.<sup>84</sup>

While there have been, and are, theologians who occupy complete opposite ends of the spectrum concerning language about God – that it is either completely literal or completely non-literal – Calvin is not one of these. There are clear statements made by him that demonstrate ". . . that Calvin held that much human language is unqualifiedly true of God."<sup>85</sup> Helm uses an example from the *Institutes* (1.17.13) where Calvin asserts certain truths about God as he sees them that are in no need of qualification; "[M]eanwhile neither

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<sup>82</sup> *ibid* p190

<sup>83</sup> DF Wright *Calvin's Accommodating God* p18

<sup>84</sup> P Helm, *Calvin's Ideas* p190, emphasis in the original

<sup>85</sup> *ibid* p193

God's plan nor his will is reversed, nor his volition altered; but what he had from eternity foreseen, approved, and decreed, he pursues in uninterrupted tenor, however sudden the variation may appear in men's eyes." What does need explanation, Helm argues, is that "sudden variation", which, in this context, is God's 'repentance', a subject that Calvin raises in the preceding section of the *Institutes*. So Calvin says,

What, therefore, does the word "repentance" mean? Surely its meaning is like that of all other modes of speaking that describe God for us in human terms. For because our weakness does not attain to his exalted state, the description of him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it. Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he seems to us.<sup>86</sup>

Why, for Calvin, does the language about God foreseeing, approving or decreeing need no further qualification? Helm's answer is that the first of these three notions "coheres with his 'core theism', particularly his emphasis on God's eternity and immutability, whereas the ascription of repentance to God doesn't."<sup>87</sup> In the light of this, Helm argues that accommodation must not be seen as reductive, ". . . as if all expressions about God must be translated into anthropomorphic terms before they can be understood."<sup>88</sup> Although the finite mind cannot grasp the infinite, it is clear that Calvin considered that truthful, accurate but limited knowledge of God can be attained.

Having dismissed reductionism, Helm also suggests that another extreme must be dismissed as well. That is, it is purely a pedagogic device. Although Calvin does clearly acknowledge this, and offers plenty of illustrations to show the vivid and engaging language the

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<sup>86</sup> *Inst* p 227 1.17.13

<sup>87</sup> P Helm, *Calvin's Ideas* p193

<sup>88</sup> *ibid* p193

Scriptures use to rouse and engage the dull minds of humanity, there is always more than this. An often quoted example of this is the one from the *Institutes* quoted earlier, where Calvin speaks of God lisping to humankind “as nurses commonly do to infants.”<sup>89</sup> R Ward Holder comments on this passage, as follows:

. . . when we explore the minds of babies, we do not expect to discover that they realize that the speech of their sitters is accommodated. When we give explanations to children of complicated phenomena, and oversimplify so as to even mis-represent, we do not believe that they are catching us in our mis-representation, and realizing that we are condescending. But in the Scriptures, God has given enough clues that humans are able to realize that God’s language is accommodated. Here stands another testimony to God’s revealing and God’s hiding. Even in the hiding which God must do to reveal something to humanity, there is no deception, but rather another pedagogy, another lesson.<sup>90</sup>

Further, Holder wants to make clear that the lesson is one that helps illuminate the character of God – the methodology of the lesson is instructive, not just its content. Humanity does not have to make do with the “prattlings of God” (*contra* Wright), which hide as much as reveal; people can be aware that God is doing just that,

. . . the wonder is that God tells us that. God does not lie, does not allow humans to believe that they are facing the real and full knowledge. Perhaps the burden of living with a knowledge that is received through a glass and dimly is a great burden. But not an unwarned burden.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> See above for the full quotation

<sup>90</sup> RW Holder, *John Calvin and the Grounding of Interpretation*. (Leiden: Brill 2006) pp 47&48

<sup>91</sup> *ibid* p 48 n 69

While Holder uses the term ‘pedagogy’, he sees accommodation as going beyond a mere teaching tool, but as a means of encouraging people to engage not only with the Scriptures but with the God of the Scriptures. This is seen quite clearly in the passage from one of Calvin’s commentaries that he quotes, in which Paul

...argues from what God has ordained. For if God established everything to some purpose, it follows that we will lose nothing in hearing the Gospel, which God intended for us, for when He speaks to us He accommodates Himself to our capacity. What Isaiah says relates to this (45:19): ‘For I have not spoken in a hiding place or in a dark corner. Not in vain did I say to the seed of Jacob, “Seek me”’.<sup>92</sup>

In a sense, it is possible to say that Calvin “can find support for accommodation in Scripture” as Holder observes.<sup>93</sup>

It is clear then that the extremes that Helm identifies do not offer sufficient explanation of Calvin’s use of accommodation – it is not simply a helpful hermeneutical device or a teaching aid. For Helm “it is a logical point, rather than a pragmatic or pedagogic point, that is at the centre of Calvin’s remarks about divine accommodation.” He explains and expands this in the following way:

A logically necessary condition of dialogue between people, or between God and humankind, is that the partners in the dialogue should act and react in time, or appear to do so. If dialogue with God is to be real dialogue, then God’s language about himself cannot be restricted to characterizing himself as eternal and immutable, even though his nature and purposes are eternal and immutable, but he must accommodate

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<sup>92</sup> quoted in *ibid* p49, see *CNTC* vol 9 pp 53&54

<sup>93</sup> *ibid*

himself to speak in ways that are characteristic of and essential to persons in dialogue with each other.<sup>94</sup>

There is, in Calvin's approach to theological language, some similarity with that of his predecessors, such as Aquinas. An important feature of this overlap is the emphasis on what can truly be known of God. The basis of his view is similar to that of Aquinas; "[T]here cannot be knowledge of God in his essence apart from knowledge of the divine nature as this is revealed to us."<sup>95</sup> Helm, however detects a dynamism in Calvin's approach that is not present in Aquinas.<sup>96</sup> It is possible to recognize that some of the language about God is metaphorical or analogical, but that is not enough for Calvin. He wishes to emphasize that "at least some of the language that we use of God is language that God uses of himself, and which God gives us to use of Him."<sup>97</sup> This insight will be followed up in Chapter 5 of this study as the language (particularly the name of God) that God is reported to use of himself is examined in some detail. Accommodation must be viewed, therefore, as a divine activity, the initiator, originator is God. As Helm explains this understanding of Calvin's view it is possible to say that,

This direction of fit, so to speak, is not from ourselves to God . . . but from God to ourselves. Divine accommodation, as Calvin treats it, is not primarily *our* theory about theological language, it is an account of some of the conditions which God chooses to say and *must* say certain things about himself in order to achieve certain ends. It is an integral feature of his self-revelation... Accommodation is a divine activity and since the ends that God seeks to secure by the use of such language are ultimately soteric in character, we must see that idea of God's accommodation of

<sup>94</sup> Helm, *Calvin's Ideas* pp 194&195

<sup>95</sup> *ibid* pp 195-6

<sup>96</sup> *ibid*, p 195 Of Aquinas he says "[B]ut I suspect that there is a kind of inertness to his account of metaphor."

<sup>97</sup> *ibid*, p 196



himself as integral to his grace, an accommodation that has its end-point in the accommodation of God the Son in the Incarnation. . . .<sup>98</sup>

This soteric end-point, highlighted by Helm, receives confirmation from the assessment made by some scholars who have examined the Pauline letters, particularly from the point of view of Paul's engagement with the methods of rhetoric. James Murphy suggests that there are elements in Paul that are not found in "pagan rhetoric", for example, Paul is conscious of ". . . God's possible intervention during the preaching event itself, in other words, of the possibility that the efficacy of a preaching discourse might depend not on the rhetorical skill of the speaker but on God's gift of grace to speaker and hearer."<sup>99</sup> Another element that is important to note, is that in classical rhetoric the focus was on the speaker, any concern for the audience was entirely devoted to understanding how the speaker's thoughts and will could sway the hearers. The reverse was true for Christian preaching, "The Christian orator is to work for the salvation of his hearers, not for his own speaking success."<sup>100</sup> The judgment of Duane Litfin is similar to that of Murphy, in that ". . . the genius of the rhetorical dynamic was its emphasis upon adaptation with a view to engineering *πίστις*", but for Paul the preacher, "the emphasis of proclamation was precisely the opposite."<sup>101</sup> Litfin's assessment of Paul's approach is that,

It was the proclaimer's function to be sure that all heard and understood, but it was not the proclaimer's role, as it certainly was the orator's, to engage this rhetorical skill in order to induce his listeners to yield to the message, however much he would like them to do so. That was a matter between the listener and the originator of the message...No artful adaptation with a view to engendering belief by rendering the

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<sup>98</sup> *ibid.* Pp 196-7

<sup>99</sup> JJ Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1974) p 282

<sup>100</sup> *ibid*

<sup>101</sup> D Litfin, *St Paul's Theology of Proclamation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994) p 248

message somehow impressive and compelling, indeed, irresistible; the matter of the listener's πιστις must be left to the Spirit alone.<sup>102</sup>

For Paul one of the main purposes of classical rhetoric was subverted by the Gospel he was given to proclaim.

When the question is asked about the origins of Calvin's use and understanding of accommodation it cannot be said to be wholly within the context of classical, rhetorical studies and certainly not simply arising from a pragmatism that seeks to unravel hermeneutical problems. Rather, it is safer to argue that Calvin is far more likely to have taken his model from Paul than from Cicero or Quintilian. If for the Apostle Paul “. . . his *modus operandi* as a preacher was required by his theological presuppositions,”<sup>103</sup> so for Calvin, in the Scriptures “[S]uch accommodated language is ‘controlled’ by literal truths about God.”<sup>104</sup> Duane Litfin puts the matter in the following way:

The most important theological presupposition which undergirds 1 Cor. 1:17-2:5 relates to God's own *modus operandi* in the world: God uses what the world considers unimpressive to accomplish his purposes so that in the end there can be no question as to who has achieved the result – God has achieved it and no man can boast. According to Paul, we are dealing here with a principle which transcends all cultural settings in Corinth; indeed a principle which transcends all cultural settings. It is nothing less than a fundamental pattern of how God chooses to operate in the world.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> *ibid*

<sup>103</sup> *ibid* p 251

<sup>104</sup> Helm, *Calvin's Ideas* p 192

<sup>105</sup> Litfin *St Paul's Theology* p 251

Despite the diversity of views concerning the origins of Calvin's approach to accommodation, this "fundamental pattern of how God chooses to operate in the world" is a viable way of describing Calvin's approach.

### ***The Spirit and the Authentication of the Word***

The second of Richard Muller's two principles noted above (p 20) is that of the testimony of the Spirit to the authority of Scripture. Muller points to a statement in the *Institutes* where both the inspiration and authority of Scripture are held together.

When that which is set forth is acknowledged to be the Word of God, there is no one so deplorably insolent – unless devoid also of both common sense and humanity itself – as to dare to impugn the credibility of Him who speaks...Hence the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard.<sup>106</sup>

In a number of places, across the whole range of his writings, Calvin is careful to point out that the Word of God is self-authenticating. That is, it needs no other witness than its own to its authority. And he can say "...that Scripture itself is self-authenticated; hence it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning." And this is so because. "...the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit."<sup>107</sup> The link between Word and Spirit is a pervasive theme in Calvin's works. In one of his earliest writings, the *Letter to Cardinal Sadoleto*, he responds to the Cardinal's original letter to the Genevans accusing him of an "affront which you offered to the Holy Spirit when you separated Him from the Word." And Calvin goes on to insist that "it is no less unreasonable to boast of the Spirit without the Word than it would be absurd to bring forward the Word itself without the

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<sup>106</sup> *Inst*, p 74 (1.7.1)

<sup>107</sup> *Inst*, p 80 (1.7.5)

Spirit.”<sup>108</sup> Elsewhere, he makes it clear that he considers “the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it,” and because of this, “we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is in the secret testimony of the Spirit.”<sup>109</sup> Later in the same section of the *Institutes* he continues:

. . . the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness to himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded.<sup>110</sup>

Similar statements can be found in his commentaries and sermons, where the Spirit’s work of authenticating the Word is made plain. He asserts, for example, that, “Since all that God says is utterly certain, he wants us to receive it into our minds with firm and unwavering assent.” But this is not possible because, “. . . this degree of certainty is beyond the capacity of the human mind.” It is, therefore, “. . . the office of the Holy Spirit to confirm within us what God promises in His Word.”<sup>111</sup> In a number of his treatises, this same point is made. Writing against the Libertines, he argues that the Apostles had “the greatest abundance of the Spirit,” but this “did not cause them to lay aside Scripture or create in them any mistrust for it.” Rather, “. . . we see that the Scripture became the focus of their entire study and

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<sup>108</sup> *T&T* Vol 1 p 36

<sup>109</sup> *Inst*, p 78 (1.7.4)

<sup>110</sup> *ibid*

<sup>111</sup> *CNTC* vol 10 p 23

obedience.” Indeed, Calvin can make the claim that the “. . . Spirit and Scripture are one and the same.”<sup>112</sup>

A final point that needs noting is that Calvin’s understanding of the inextricable link between Word and Spirit is not a discreet topic in his theological thinking. It is part of his wider consideration of the doctrine of God and the knowledge of God. And this means, according to Richard Muller, that “[I]n order to understand Calvin’s view of Scripture as a living revelation of God, we will need to take very seriously not only the development of his exposition but also its terminus in the doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>113</sup> This Trinitarian basis of revelation is made clear in the passage from the *Institutes* quoted just above in regard to the connection between Word and Spirit. Here God “alone is a fit witness of himself”, that witness is made known in his Word (Christ being the sum, the focus and the heart of that Word) and “it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.”<sup>114</sup> Again this notion is a pervasive one and appears in many of Calvin’s writings, one further example will suffice for the purpose of this study:

. . . inasmuch as Christ was the eternal Word of God, He was always one God with the Father. Therefore . . . Christ was a faithful witness of God to the disciples, so that their faith was grounded on nothing but the truth of God, inasmuch as the Father Himself spoke in the Son. The receiving of which He speaks came from His efficaciously manifesting to them the name of His father though the Holy Spirit.<sup>115</sup>

There are then, for Calvin, some clear lineaments to the doctrine of Scripture and although there is no one single treatment of the doctrine in his corpus, many elements of it are spelled

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<sup>112</sup> J Calvin *Treatises against the Anabaptists and against the Libertines* trans BW Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker 1982) p 224

<sup>113</sup> RA Muller, *Foundation of Calvin's Theology* in Gamble vol 6 p 400

<sup>114</sup> Inst, p 79 (1.7.4)

<sup>115</sup> *CNTC* vol 5 p140 (John 17:2). See also *CNTC* vol 10 p 57 ( 2Cor 4:5)

out in different places. The summary of THL Parker offers a good foundation for any attempt to systematize Calvin's doctrine. Parker suggests three main concepts, these are:

. . . that revelation is the activity of God himself; that it is an activity of the Trinity; that it is executed in a form that shall be apprehensible by the recipient. Calvin is nothing if not Trinitarian. That God reveals himself in the Bible means that the Father reveals himself in the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. 'By the power of the Holy Spirit ' demands in this context both that the original writing of Scripture shall be in some way, but in a real way, the work of the Spirit and that full apprehension of it shall be by the inner enlightenment of the Spirit.<sup>116</sup>

In the light of the discussion so far, one more element needs to be emphasized. Calvin clearly sees that God's speech has a soteriological purpose as well and further evidence of this will be adduced later in this chapter. God's speech is not simply accommodated to the capacity of humankind so that they might attain intellectual knowledge; it is so that they might enjoy personal knowledge, a relationship with God. Accommodation is not simply to address the "dullness" of the human mind but is part of God's purpose in overcoming the noetic effects of sin that destroy or prevent the possibility of such a relationship. This is why Calvin attaches great importance to the need to maintain the indissoluble link between Word and Spirit. As John Webster puts it, "Revelation is thus not simply the bridging of a noetic divide (though it includes that), but it is reconciliation, salvation and therefore fellowship."<sup>117</sup> Calvin, when considering "The knowledge of God the Redeemer", is concerned to point out the sufficiency of the work of Christ when he says that he ". . . left unfinished nothing of the sum total of our salvation." And yet the fullness of that salvation

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<sup>116</sup> THL Parker *Calvin's New Testament commentaries* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 1993) p 94 see PW Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response* (New York: Oxford University Press 1995) pp 56-61

<sup>117</sup> J Webster, *Holy Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003) p16

lies in the future (although there are present benefits). “Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit bids us rely upon the promises . . . We enjoy Christ only as we embrace Christ clad in his own promises.”<sup>118</sup> In the purpose of God, the Word and Spirit together enable those who believe to enter into relationship with God. Calvin clearly sees the ‘direction of fit’ as being from God to humanity, the Word to the world and having a soteriological intent. This conclusion can also be evidenced in the way that Calvin spoke and wrote about the way that both humankind and God make use of speech.

### **Human and Divine Speech**

Calvin begins the *Institutes* saying that “. . . true and sound wisdom consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves,” and that is difficult to discern “which one precedes and brings forth the other.”<sup>119</sup> At the close of the first chapter he makes it clear that he will discuss the knowledge of God first because “the order of right teaching requires that we discuss” this first.<sup>120</sup> This section approaches the topic from the point of view of human speech for a pragmatic as well as a theological reason. Human speech is fundamental to all that we know; it is our major means of knowledge acquisition. Our knowledge of others, their character, actions and intentions are most clearly made known to us through speech. Our understanding of speech is gained through its use; its function is made clear in its regular operation and action. So, pragmatically this chapter starts with investigating the way Calvin understood its use (and abuse). The theological justification for starting with human speech has already been considered in the discussion of Calvin’s view of accommodation. There, it has been seen that speech is the principal medium of communication between God and his creatures. It is because of God’s accommodation, God condescending to the level

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<sup>118</sup> *Inst*, p 426 (2.9.3)

<sup>119</sup> *Inst*, p.35 (1.1.1)

<sup>120</sup> *Inst*, p 39 (1.1.3)

and capacity of human beings, that knowledge of, or relationship with, God is possible. An understanding of human speech will inform, therefore, our understanding of divine speech, as it is precisely through this vehicle/medium God has determined to relate to the creation.

### ***Human Speech***

Calvin's *Treatise against the Libertines* (1545) was written following requests from Poullain and Farel, who asked him to speak out against this sect, and about his own perception of the threat it offered to the Church. In Calvin's view "heretics" such as these "are not only like thieves and wolves, but are much worse...they are like poison, murdering poor souls", rather than feeding them as faithful shepherds.<sup>121</sup> The occasion that particularly called forth this *Treatise* was the effect leaders of the sect seemed to be having in the court of Marguerite of Angoulême. And the principle target of his attack was the group known as Quintinists. Farley summarises their teaching, as Calvin describes it, as "an esoteric and pantheistic form of determinism, characterised by a crass antinomian and libertine ethic and tinged with a radical eschatology."<sup>122</sup> Chapter 7 of the *Treatise* deals particularly with the issue of language. The apparent success of this sect is because they use a "high style" of speech that is designed to deceive and "...take a novice and leave him to gape and wonder, his mouth agog, without understanding anything."<sup>123</sup> Indeed, "... the art of being able to disguise themselves and to speak with a double tongue" is "the first article of their faith."<sup>124</sup> Their speech is idle, seductive, absurd and dangerous, no more than "silly

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<sup>121</sup> Calvin, *Against the Libertines*, p188

<sup>122</sup> B Farley in *ibid*, p164

<sup>123</sup> *ibid* p 214

<sup>124</sup> *ibid* p 217



speculation”—an abuse of God’s good gifts in creation. Against this abuse, Calvin states his own view of human speech:

For God created the tongue for the purpose of expressing thought in order that we might be able to communicate with each other. Consequently, it is a perversion of God’s order to pommel the air with a confused sound that cannot be understood, or to try by subtle means to go around one’s elbow to get to one’s thumb in order to awaken one’s hearers and then leave them in such a state.<sup>125</sup>

The model for human speech is not to be found in any high-sounding human artifice but in the model God has given us.

[T]he Scriptures ought to be our guide with respect to how God’s mysteries are to be handled. Therefore let us adopt the language that it uses without being light-headed. For the Lord knows quite well that if He were to speak to us in a manner befitting His majesty, our intelligence would be incapable of reaching that high. Thus He accommodates Himself to our smallness. And as a wet nurse was to her baby, so He uses towards us an unrefined way of speaking in order to be understood.<sup>126</sup>

Contained in these passages are some clear presuppositions about human speech. It is, in the first place, an integral part of human createdness, an essential element in God’s ordering of human life that enables persons to communicate, to relate to each other. There is also, in Calvin’s view, an in-built relationship between thought and speech, the latter giving expression to the former, as has already been seen above. He also acknowledges that people *do* or *accomplish* things by speech—it is an action that issues in persuading, informing,

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<sup>125</sup> *ibid* p 214

<sup>126</sup> *ibid* pp 214-215

misleading, etc. Further, communication presupposes that speech will be characterised by clarity and intelligibility—it will be governed by an accepted set of rules. This does not mean, however, that speech must of necessity be cold, rational and precise. Calvin shows by his own use that it can be, for example, dramatic, emotive, or metaphorical.

In a sermon preached on Deuteronomy 5:20 (5<sup>th</sup> July 1555) further evidence is given concerning Calvin's understanding of human speech. It has as its context a further 199 sermons preached on the whole book (begun on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1555 and concluded on 15<sup>th</sup> July of the next year). His preaching through the Decalogue in Deuteronomy, as with all his biblical exposition, was motivated by a number of factors. Driven by his commitment to the authority of Scripture, he gave it the central place in his ministry.<sup>127</sup> And from this central commitment came two other purposes, at least. One was polemical—in much of his preaching there was a clear attempt to show that the Church of Rome's claim to possess and safeguard the truth was not consistent with the Bible itself, especially in the area of practice. He also sought to expound "Holy Scripture in a way that he thought would be profitable for his people and build them up as children of God."<sup>128</sup>

A further aspect of the context of these sermons was the work that Calvin had already done on the Ten Commandments. By the time he came to preach these sermons he had already offered explanations of them in four major editions of the *Institutes* (1536, 1539, 1543 and 1550). In the *Institutes*, Calvin speaks of a double principle for understanding the Law in terms of opposites—that is, if a commandment expresses that which displeases God, then

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<sup>127</sup> All the biographical accounts of Calvin emphasise the place of preaching in his ministry. See for example, B Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1995) chap 13; THL Parker, *John Calvin* (London: Dent 1975) pp 89-96.

<sup>128</sup> Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1992) p 127

the opposite pleases him and if it is clear what pleases him then the opposite must displease him.<sup>129</sup>

A final point needs to be made concerning the context of the sermon under consideration, and that concerns the social and historical situation. For a decade, from March 1546 until the month the sermons on the Decalogue began, June 1555, Geneva (and Calvin in particular) was embroiled in a number of controversies. Some of these were over the application of laws enacted through the civil authorities; some were over the doctrine of predestination and others involved external pressures, especially from the Bernese. His opponents frequently vilified Calvin, and Geneva's key role in the movement for reform was in danger of being undermined. At the heart of all this turmoil the key issue was whether or not people, churches and cities would submit themselves to the authority of Scripture and seek the honour of God. It is against this background that he preached his sermons. The sermon on Deuteronomy 5:20 has much to say concerning how people treat one another in this context and there may be deeply personal allusions in many of Calvin's expressions, for example, "...once you have thoughtfully considered it, it is certain that false reports, calumnies, and slanders hurt far more than stealing does."<sup>130</sup> And, even his comments on speech may well reflect the needs of the moment to some degree:

Now if we want to observe what this text contains, we need to consider a higher principle, that is to consider why God created our tongues and why he gave us speech, the reason being that we might communicate with each other. Now what is the purpose of human communication if it isn't our mutual support and charity? Consequently, then, it is essential for us to learn to bridle our tongues to the extent

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<sup>129</sup> This is discussed by Calvin in *Inst*, 2:8:8

<sup>130</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on the Ten Commandments* ed & trans by B W Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 1980) p 205

that the union which God commands us may constantly be nurtured as much as possible.<sup>131</sup>

Then, having referred to the damage the tongue can do as described in the Epistle of James, he goes on to say:

. . . knowing that God provided us with a unique gift when he gave us a means of being able to communicate with each other. So on the one hand men's affection may be hidden, but on the other the tongue exists to reveal our hearts. Therefore let us be encouraged to use such a gift and not to soil it with our vices and deplorableness. And seeing that God has given it to us for the purpose of nurturing tender love and fraternity with each other, may we not abuse it in order to gossip and hustle about here and there, so perverting our speech as to poison ourselves against each other.<sup>132</sup>

These extracts illustrate a number of factors already mentioned. One of Calvin's central concerns was the establishment of the believing community and the maintenance of its unity. If he was at pains, as he was, to show why false witnessing was forbidden and to stress what damage it could do, he also wished to teach a positive, responsible and constructive manner of life and speech. The particular circumstance in Geneva at the time would have heightened his concerns and, almost certainly, influenced his expression of them. But in the context of the commandment he was dealing with, as with all the others in this series of expositions, he was consistently using his method of setting, in this case, a negative command in the light of positive instructions. Once again, as Calvin focuses on

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<sup>131</sup> *ibid* p 216

<sup>132</sup> *ibid* p 216

human speech, he sees one reason for the commandment is creational and another is covenantal. There is a clear creational purpose in human speech—it is a gift given, an ability implanted by God and its function is to allow, indeed to promote, communication. It does promote general human relationships but it has a more focused goal, and that is covenantal. The commandment under consideration is just one of a number given to a specific community and the covenantal context and implications are clear:

Moreover, when it pleases him by his infinite goodness to enter into a common treaty, and when he mutually binds himself to us without having to do so, when he enumerates that treaty article by article, when he chooses to be our father and savior, when he receives us as his flock and inheritance, let us abide under his protection filled with its eternal life for us.<sup>133</sup>

Calvin goes on to expand on this theme, emphasizing God’s grace and tenderness towards his people—“You are my little family”<sup>134</sup> – and reasserting that each of the commandments is an integral part of being in that relationship with God and belonging to that community. Creational and covenantal reasons come together, therefore, to emphasize the relational function of human speech. There is also a clear connection between human thought, emotion and speech. At the heart of this commandment is not just the words of the false witness, but rather the evil intentions behind them.<sup>135</sup> Speech, then, is the revealer of mind and heart. The good that can be accomplished by human speech can also be vitiated by human fallenness. The tongue is easily corrupted and speech can be a powerful source of harm, as the Epistle of James bears witness.<sup>136</sup> As Calvin expounds this commandment, the

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<sup>133</sup> *ibid* p 45

<sup>134</sup> *ibid* p 45

<sup>135</sup> *ibid* p 45

<sup>136</sup> *ibid* p 207

foundational assumption of his preaching here is that human beings are responsible for their speech. It is a gift or facility that can be used or abused; speakers take responsibility for their speech.

The year after Calvin had preached his sermons on the Decalogue, he revised and reissued his commentaries on the New Testament Epistles. According to THL Parker, this revision was thorough and represents Calvin's mature thinking on the Epistles. Although there was another edition released in 1563, apart from a limited number of corrections, it represented no advance on the 1556 edition.<sup>137</sup> It is probable that the New Testament commentaries were specifically written as commentaries, rather than produced as a result of Calvin's lectures on these biblical books. Certainly, at the time he was revising the commentaries on the Epistles, he was, in fact, lecturing on books from the Old Testament. This is not to suggest that there was no overlap between Calvin's work of writing commentaries, lecturing and preaching. Rather, it is to assert that each was done from a particular perspective and for a particular goal. The most succinct statement of the basic purpose of Calvin's commentaries, already referred to above, is found in the Dedication to Simon Grynaeus in the earliest of Calvin's New Testament commentaries, that on Romans (1540). There are three important terms at the heart of this statement—*perspicuitas*, *brevitas* and *facilitas*. These govern the task that he is attempting in commenting on Scripture: he wants his work to be marked by clarity, brevity and simplicity. And the object of these governing principles is that his readers might be led into understanding the "mind of the writer whom he has undertaken to expound."<sup>138</sup> The commentaries, therefore, do not have the same

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<sup>137</sup> See Parker, *Calvin's NT Commentaries*, pp 36ff

<sup>138</sup> See *CNTC*, vol 8 p 1 and p 14 above

polemical and practical goals as the sermons, although it must be noted that Calvin does not always maintain a total consistency of purpose.

A final example in the present survey is taken from the *Institutes* and again focuses on the Decalogue and part of his exposition of the ninth commandment (Exodus 20:16). Initially, the work was conceived by Calvin to be a basic catechism or theological primer, and it was directed at the edification of young Christians. Calvin's own purpose was made clear in the *Prefatory Address to King Francis of France*:

My purpose was solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness. And I undertook this labour especially for our French countrymen, very many of whom I knew to be hungering and thirsting for Christ; but I saw very few of them who had been duly imbued with even a slight knowledge of him. The book itself witnesses that this was my intention, adapted as it is to a simple and, you may say, elementary form of teaching.<sup>139</sup>

This *Prefatory Address* was included in all the main editions of the *Institutes* from the very first and also included an apologia for the course of reform in France. He argued that the views of the Reformers were not new, did not deny the teachings of the Church Fathers and were concerned with truth more than tradition.

The *Institutes* underwent some radical reshaping and the inclusion of new material before they were reissued in 1539. A new preface, *John Calvin to the Reader*, signalled the purpose of these changes:

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<sup>139</sup> *Inst*, p9

Moreover, it has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling.<sup>140</sup>

This sets out Calvin's basic theological programme. The *Institutes* provided a framework to aid the reading Scripture—they were to enable and enhance that reading, not to replace it. And, they were not intended to replace Calvin's commentaries and sermons. It is possible to attribute a priority to the *Institutes* as the “sole authoritative exposition of his religious ideas”<sup>141</sup> but this is to ignore Calvin's own design and to miss the development of some ideas which are virtually passed over in the *Institutes*.

The exposition of the Moral Law is situated in Book 2 of the *Institutes*, which is primarily concerned with *The Knowledge of God the Redeemer*. It is of note that the context of this exposition is concerned with how the Old and New Testament alike speak with one voice concerning redemption and the work of Christ. Although mention is made of the covenant and law, this is not the place where Calvin fully expounds his understanding of them. That exposition is reserved for his commentary on the *Harmony of the Last Four Books of Moses*, where ninety-three pages of the Calvin Translation Society edition are devoted to an excursus on *The Use of the Law*.<sup>142</sup> While the use of the Law is treated in the *Institutes*, it is a relatively brief treatment and it forwards the overall purpose of the work; whereas the commentary deals with, for example, the relationship of covenant and law, human

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<sup>140</sup> *Inst*, p 4

<sup>141</sup> McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford Blackwell 1990) p 146

<sup>142</sup> CC, Vol 3, pp 196-289



obligations and the promises associated with the law. Calvin's own summary shows why he turns to an exposition of the Moral Law at this point:

Now in summarizing what is required for the true knowledge of God, we have taught that we cannot conceive him in his greatness, without being immediately confronted by his majesty, and so compelled to worship him. In our discussion of the knowledge of ourselves we have set forth this chief point: that, empty of all opinion of our own virtue, and shorn of all assurance of our own righteousness—in fact, broken and crushed by the awareness of our own utter poverty—we may learn genuine humility and self-abasement. Both of these the Lord accomplishes in his law.<sup>143</sup>

One of the reasons for God making known the Law is for the sake of clarity—it is a clearer witness than the natural law written on the hearts of all. In the written law God seeks reverence for himself and offers rewards and blessings to the obedient. So Calvin says,

For because the eye of our mind is too blind to be moved solely by the beauty of the good, our most merciful Father out of his great kindness has willed to attract us by sweetness of rewards to love and seek after him. He announces, therefore, that the rewards for virtues are stored up with him, and that the man who obeys his commandments does not do so in vain.<sup>144</sup>

It is in this light that the Decalogue must be taught, and the emphasis that Calvin makes in his sermons is present in the *Institutes*. As has already been seen in the Sermon on the ninth commandment, the teacher must consider the complementary truth that goes with them.

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<sup>143</sup> *Inst*, p 367 (2:8:1)

<sup>144</sup> *Inst*, p 370 (2.8.4)

The teaching on the ninth commandment is relatively brief in the *Institutes*, but it demonstrates the manner in which Calvin thinks any exposition of the command should be accomplished. It also highlights the theme previously considered; that of the function of speech in relationships and community. Calvin begins with the assertion that “since God (who is truth) abhors a lie, we must practice truth without deceit toward one another”. This is because words have consequences; speech has effects, truthful speech results in the protection of the integrity of a neighbour’s name and his possessions:

Hence this commandment is lawfully observed when our tongue, in declaring the truth, serves both the good repute and the advantage of our neighbours...we harm a man more by despoiling him of the integrity of his name than by taking away his possessions. In plundering his substance, however, we sometimes do as much by false testimony as by snatching with our hands.<sup>145</sup>

Calvin is also prepared to say what is not “evilspeaking” (to use his term). It is “not reproof made with intent to chastise; not accusation or judicial denunciation to remedy evil”. Rather it “extends to forbidding us to affect a fawning politeness barbed with bitter taunts under the guise of joking”. This kind of speech indicates the true nature of a person—“it is absurd to think that God hates the disease of evilspeaking in the tongue, but does not disapprove of evil intent in the heart.”<sup>146</sup> The exposition of the ninth commandment, as with the whole of the Decalogue in the *Institutes*, is less practical and expansive than in the sermons. This can be accounted for in part by the intention of Calvin—the training of ministers—and by the overall scheme of the *Institutes*. There is no mention, for example, of the “principle” expressed in the treatise and sermon previously examined; that is, that

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<sup>145</sup> *Inst*, p 412 (2:8:47)

<sup>146</sup> see *Inst*, pp 412-413 (2:8:48)

speech is a gift from God to enable communication and community. Within the overall perspective of the *Institutes* these things are implied at the very least. In his earlier statements in Book 1 concerning the createdness of humanity he is clear that every gift and faculty comes from God.<sup>147</sup> And in Book 4 he will be concerned with both the community of the Church and the State.<sup>148</sup> There is, for Calvin, a close link between human thought and speech and, although he does not use such evocative language as he does elsewhere, there is a direct connection between “evilspeaking” and “evil intentions”. Once more, it is clear that he views speech as agency, as a means of accomplishing a purpose. When linked with a person’s intention it cannot be morally neutral. True speech is backed by the sincerity of the speaker and he or she takes responsibility for his or her speech. An additional element in understanding human speech is introduced in this context. To interpret this and the other commandments in his two-fold sense, Calvin says, “the commandments and prohibitions always contain more than is expressed in words.”<sup>149</sup> And he proceeds to his exposition with this as a basic presupposition. Behind the meaning of the sentence that has been spoken there can be a more complex meaning intended by the speaker. Although, for Calvin, the speaker is God at this point, the medium is human speech; and through it the speaker can mean more than he says.

Several overlapping ideas have been seen in these extracts from Calvin’s works. In the first place, the createdness of human speech is clear from the references to it as God’s gift. It is not given to individuals simply as a personal attribute. Rather, it arises from the purposes of God – it is part of his design-plan for humankind – that persons are made to live in society.

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<sup>147</sup> see e.g. 1:15 & 16

<sup>148</sup> see e.g. 4:1:3, 4 & 9; 4:20:1-3

<sup>149</sup> *Inst*, p 374 (2.8.8)

Speech promotes that society and enables it to function, playing a major part particularly in the creation of relationships. Moreover, speech is bound up with embodied life and is an extension of it, in the sense that it allows a person to “move around in social space”.<sup>150</sup> It is both a catalyst and mode for social interaction.

Relationships are dependent to a great extent on communication and speech is the normal mode of that communication. As Calvin makes clear when he links thought with speech, the words and sentences uttered are vehicles for the speaker’s thinking, feelings and intentions. The person is revealed through their speech and that speech is not necessarily a singular or stereotypical form of utterance. It is pluriform, being expressed for example in an emotive, dramatic or metaphorical way. The style of utterance is not simply used for its own sake but for a purpose - to challenge, warn or inform for example. Calvin sees the deliberate misuse of speech (and style) as an example of this purposefulness in action, but warped by sin. Above all, for speech to be effective, in terms of creating and promoting relationships, it has to be clear and intelligible. It is a rule-governed activity and both parties within a relationship, for it to function, must both know and use the rules. The Libertines were attacked by Calvin for making their speech obscure rather than adapting it to the needs of their audience. The principle of accommodation is to be operative in human discourse.

As speech can, and does, bring about relationships; as it is capable also of edifying, rebuking, challenging etc., Calvin views it, therefore, as an action. It has a dynamic of its own - speech accomplishes things. A corollary of this is that where there is an action there is also an agent and this is particularly evident when he writes of the responsibilities of the speaker. Each utterance has a person standing behind it giving it personal backing and being responsible for it.

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<sup>150</sup> See Gill, *Mediated Transcendence* (Macon: Mercer University Press 1989) pp127-128 for this expression

### *A Model for Human Speech?*

An extract from the commentary on 1 Corinthians will provide a further example of Calvin's understanding of human speech and how it is to be used. The text on which he is commenting is 1 Cor 1:17, concerning the way speech is used in the context of the preaching of the gospel and in the Church. He has already made it clear that "no person will ever be fit for teaching, if he has not first absorbed the power of the Gospel, so that he speaks, not so much with his lips but from his very heart."<sup>151</sup> Focussing on the expression "not in the wisdom of words", Calvin suggests that Paul was anticipating possible objections against him and his ministry:

For these misguided teachers could infer that Paul, who had no gift of eloquence, was making a ridiculous boast in claiming that the role of teacher had been laid upon him. For that reason he says, by way of concession, that he was not a born orator, who might blazon himself in a splendour of words, but a minister of the Spirit, a servant, who, with unpolished and ordinary speech, might bring down the wisdom of the world.<sup>152</sup>

Paul's main contention is that, however skilful the speech of some in Corinth might be, it is in danger of disguising the simplicity of the gospel. And however foolish or simplistic Paul's own speech was considered to be, he wishes to maintain it was the legitimate and right way. According to Calvin,

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<sup>151</sup> *CNTC*, vol 9, pp 8 & 9

<sup>152</sup> *ibid*, pp 31 & 32

It is as though he said: “I know how much those easy-going teachers of yours coax you with their high-sounding language. For my part, not only do I confess that my preaching is done in a style that is unpolished, clumsy, and far from cultivated, but I even glory in it. For it ought to have been like that, and indeed this method was prescribed to me by God.”<sup>153</sup>

As God has accommodated himself to humanity to make known the truth about himself and the gospel, so Calvin understands Paul to be saying that he follows that model, communicating “in a style that is unpolished, clumsy and far from cultivated in order that no eloquence will obscure the heart of the message.” In this way, Paul, in Calvin’s view, prevents the gospel from being buried beneath clever speeches and illegitimate appeals to the hearers’ sensibilities. Calvin anticipates some possible objections, particularly concerning the value of the “wisdom of words” and the use of eloquence in the service of the gospel.<sup>154</sup> First he makes clear that he considers these things to be gifts of God, through the work of the Holy Spirit:

Therefore there is nothing irreligious about those arts, for they contain sound learning, and depend on principles of truth; and since they are useful and suitable for the general affairs of human society, there is no doubt that they have come from the Holy Spirit. Further, the usefulness which is derived and experienced from them ought not to be ascribed to anyone but God.<sup>155</sup>

There are dangers that need to be considered, the chief of which is when the use of these gifts disguises the simplicity of the gospel.

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<sup>153</sup> *ibid*, p32

<sup>154</sup> *ibid*, p 33

<sup>155</sup> *ibid*, p 33

For the preaching of Christ is bare and simple...The characteristic work of the Gospel is to bring down the wisdom of the world in such a manner, that deprived of our own understanding we become completely docile, and do not consider knowing, or even desire to know anything but what the Lord teaches us.<sup>156</sup>

But this raises another question —“Could not He who designs the tongues of men for eloquence be Himself skilful in speech if He wished?”<sup>157</sup> There is no doubt in Calvin’s mind that God could use eloquence but that it was a matter of deliberate choice that he did not. Two reasons are offered for this choice—the first is that against the background of “unpolished and unrefined language” the truth of God might be more clearly seen and the work of the Spirit might be more effective in bringing that truth home to human hearts. Secondly, the plainness of the truth teaches humility, as it invites “obedience and teachableness.”<sup>158</sup> Again, anticipating a possible objection in his own day, Calvin raises the question of the legitimacy of using eloquence to communicate the gospel. The acid test is how it serves the gospel and, quoting Augustine, he asserts that the eloquent preacher can be a gift from God—“He who gave Peter the fisherman, also gave Cyprian, the orator.”<sup>159</sup> Finally, he declares that “the Spirit of God has...an eloquence of His own.” Amongst Old Testament writers who exhibited it are David, Isaiah and Solomon. The Apostles also show “a few tiny sparks of it.” But in human agents:

It follows that the eloquence, which is in keeping with the Spirit of God, is not bombastic and ostentatious, and does not make a lot of noise that amounts to

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<sup>156</sup> *ibid*,

<sup>157</sup> *ibid*,

<sup>158</sup> *ibid*,

<sup>159</sup> *ibid*

nothing. Rather it is genuine and efficacious, and has more sincerity than refinement.<sup>160</sup>

The implications of these comments on 1 Cor 1:17 for Calvin's understanding of human speech relate to and, in some cases, amplify some of his notions previously considered. There is a great emphasis on clarity and simplicity and their purpose is to effect communication. "High-sounding language" may delight or delude, whereas speech which is "far from cultivated" has a directness which enhances its use—enabling communication. Once more Calvin sees speech, whether simple or cultivated, to be a gift of God and a means of relationship between human beings and God. But, as before, the relational aspect of speech includes interpersonal and societal relationships and Calvin is very willing to say that this is part of the work of the Holy Spirit. Speech that exhibits "sound learning", depending on "principles of truth", and that is of value and utility for "the general affairs of human society" comes from the Holy Spirit.<sup>161</sup> Calvin's guiding principles for writing biblical commentaries would also seem applicable as principles for speech—*perspicuitas*, *brevitas* and *facilitas*. This insistence does not mean a condemnation or rejection of eloquence; rather, it underlines the priority of use or purpose. The question to ask of speech is, "What purpose does it serve?" The eloquence, which Calvin was prepared to accept and use, was that which came from the heart not just from the lips.<sup>162</sup> It was an eloquence that was truly from and of the human agent; speech that was backed by commitment rather than a linguistic artifice. As he closes his comment on the words of 1 Cor 1:17, he underlines this by emphasizing that human speech that is honouring to, and honoured by, the Spirit of

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<sup>160</sup> *ibid*, p 35

<sup>161</sup> *ibid*, p 33

<sup>162</sup> *CNTC* vol 9 p 33



God is genuine, efficacious and sincere (or substantial). These characteristics mirror, to some degree, the contemporary understanding of rhetoric of which Calvin would have been aware, and show that he did not totally reject that art. In considering the efficacy of speech, Calvin, following Paul, is aware of a network of relationships involving the words of Scripture, the work of the Holy Spirit and the activity of the human preacher. As Serene Jones says:

Thus, for Calvin, the eloquence of Scripture, the power of the Spirit, and the rhetorical finesse of the theologian must work together to persuade and move the hearts of the faithful. The force of this point should not be missed: in order for faith to be nurtured by doctrine, in order for hearts to be moved by the truth of divine wisdom, the theologian must construct discourse capable of teaching, convincing, delighting, encouraging, and challenging the reader ‘to know God and to do his will’.<sup>163</sup>

Both with and through the Holy Spirit, human speech is also perceived as accomplishing something, as producing effects. Yet it has as its model the speech of God himself.

### ***Divine Speech***

Amongst the earliest of Calvin’s writings is the Latin preface that he wrote for Olivétan’s *French Bible* (1535AD). The main thrust of his preface is to assert the right of the common people to hear and read the Bible. The only justification for its publication, he suggests, is its own inherent nature. That is, that:

. . . the oracle and eternal truth of the Highest King, Lord of heaven, earth, and the sea, and King of Kings, is the guarantor of the privileges [to publish it]. This

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<sup>163</sup> S Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*, p 27

magnificently and splendidly commends it to us. This commands that it be publicly and privately received with the highest reverence by all peoples, times and classes.

Here is an edict to which all men as one ought to be obedient.<sup>164</sup>

This universal availability of the oracle and truth of God is not accepted or practised by a certain group, those whom Calvin calls Rabbis. These are the learned theologians of the day who wish to retain for themselves the right to read and teach the Scriptures. They are generally “aided by the considerable support of innate ability and learning yet in mid-life have often failed.”<sup>165</sup> If this privileged group cannot attain full understanding, even after their long search to uncover the “divine mysteries” it was considered impossible for the illiterate and the untutored to do so. This attitude, if taken to its logical conclusion, demeans the apostolic band taught by Christ himself, as they were but fishermen, argues Calvin. Their attitude sets itself over against the model given by the Lord himself. Calvin has no intention of undermining the teaching office within the Church; it is part of “the splendid goodness of God” to “appoint prophets, doctors and interpreters”. His overall goal is:

. . . that the faithful people of God be permitted to hear their God speaking and learn from [Him] teaching. Seeing that he wills to be known by the least to the greatest: since all are promised to be God-taught; since he confesses as yet always to be working amongst his own; ...When, therefore we see that there are people from all classes who are making progress in God’s school, we acknowledge his truth which promised a pouring forth of his Spirit on all flesh.<sup>166</sup>

The fact that God can and does speak is, as has been stated, a fundamental presupposition for Calvin which will remain constant through his theological and literary career. This early

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<sup>164</sup> *Inst* 1536. p 374

<sup>165</sup> *ibid*

<sup>166</sup> *ibid*

writing also points to another fundamental conviction, which is that when God speaks, he speaks in such a way, that all can understand.<sup>167</sup> It is also of note that Calvin juxtaposes a number of notions that overlap and interrelate with his statement about God speaking. They are the notions of teaching and nurturing, which are outcomes of God speaking; God working by speaking among his people; and a relationship between God speaking, promising and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Early in the reformer's career he was asked by friends to reply to those who hold the doctrine of soul sleep and who were classified by both Calvin and Zwingli as being amongst the Anabaptists. The original version of his reply was written in 1534 in Orleans but not published until 1542. In the meantime a new preface *To the Reader* was added to it in 1536. In this preface he recognises that he has used some harsh language but wants to make it clear that there are some important issues at stake. Calvin is concerned about both the origin and authority of false teaching. It rises, he claims, not from what God says, but from their own intellects and is both “foreign growth” and “deadliest poison”. So he writes:

I am aware of the power which novelty has to tickle the ears of certain persons: but we ought to reflect that truth has only one voice - that which proceeds from the lips of our Lord. To him alone ought we to open our ears when the doctrine of salvation is in question, while to all others we should keep them shut. His word, I say, is not new, but that which was from the beginning, is, and always shall be.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> See the earlier discussion of accommodation.

<sup>168</sup> *T&T* vol 3 p 417

Error comes in when the word of God has been laid aside, and the antidote to error is “to always hang on our Lord’s lips.”<sup>169</sup> As part of his controversy with the Anabaptists, Calvin enlists the concept of accommodation to undermine their teaching. The problem his opponents faced was making sense of Christ’s words to the penitent thief: “Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise”, Luke 23:43. This does not fit with their dogmatic scheme so they import the notion of one day being as a 1000 years from 2 Peter 3:8. “But,” says Calvin; “they remember not that God in speaking to man, accommodates himself to human sense.” And he parodies their argument by saying no one would listen to their argument if they said “God would do something today, and then should immediately explain it as meaning thousands of years.”<sup>170</sup> Once again, Calvin’s presupposition that God speaks is made plain as he exhorts his readers to “hang on our Lord’s lips.” It is also clear that he does not see any difficulty in moving between saying, “God speaks” and “Christ speaks”. An interesting feature of the way that he does this is in the use of metonymy – in the address *To the Reader* he uses lips to stand for the complete action of God’s or Christ’s speaking. This device is much favoured by Calvin across the whole range of his writings. Two other issues need to be noticed here. The first is his use of accommodation, which, as has been suggested above, is not simply a hermeneutical strategy for Calvin, but a deeper and pervasive theological principle, which undergirds his understanding of God’s disposition towards humanity. The other issue is that of personal backing: God stands behind his speech and takes responsibility for it; the “highest King” is the guarantor of his own word. The speaker is responsible for both the effectiveness of the communication and for its truth.

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<sup>169</sup> *ibid*, p 418

<sup>170</sup> *ibid*, p 447

This basic pre-supposition in Calvin's thinking, that God speaks, appears in many places in his commentaries, where it is simply stated and only occasionally does he write of what that implies. An example of his more extended comments on this can be found in his commentary on Genesis (1554) and his remarks on Chapter 4 verse 6 where God is speaking to Cain.

Moses does not state in what manner God spoke. Whether a vision was presented to him, or he heard an oracle from heaven, or was admonished by secret inspiration, he certainly felt himself bound by a divine judgment... We may observe that the word of God was delivered from the beginning by oracles, in order that afterwards, when administered by the hands of men, it might receive the greater reverence.<sup>171</sup>

However the communication actually happened, there is no doubt in Calvin's mind that it can be described legitimately as God's speaking. Hence he goes on to say:

Let us rather conclude, that, before the heavenly teaching was committed to public records, God often made known his will by extraordinary methods, and that here was the *foundation* which supported reverence for his word; while the doctrine delivered through the hands of men was like the *edifice* itself . . . Therefore, as the voice of God had previously so sounded in the ears of Adam, that he certainly perceived God to speak; so it is also now directed to Cain.<sup>172</sup>

He is not talking here solely about speech that is recorded and, therefore, frozen in time. The reason he makes this point is to underline the authority of Scripture for his own situation that it has its origin in, and continues to be, the speech of God.

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<sup>171</sup> CC vol 1 p 198

<sup>172</sup> *ibid*, p 199

In the same commentary it is possible to discern something more of Calvin's understanding of the nature of God's speech, in particular its effectiveness as an act. Commenting on the creation of light (Genesis 1:3), he begins with the observation that, "Moses now, for the first time, introduces God in the act of *speaking*."<sup>173</sup> Acknowledging that nothing was made without the Word, according to John's Gospel (1:3), it is not until the creation of light that God's wisdom becomes evident.<sup>174</sup> This action of God is intentional, according to Calvin:

It did not, however, happen from any inconsideration or by accident, that the light preceded the sun and the moon. To nothing are we more prone than to tie down the power of God to those instruments, the agency of which he employs...Therefore the Lord, by the very order of the creation, bears witness that he holds in his hand the light, which he is able to impart to us without the sun and the moon.<sup>175</sup>

In a further comment on the creation account when God blesses the creatures of both sea and sky (1:22), he sees the speaking of the blessing as the act itself. "For God...by the bare intimation of his purpose, effects what men seek by earnest entreaty".<sup>176</sup> Calvin clearly sees the words uttered by God as effectual for the accomplishment of God's purpose when considering the creation of humanity. Rather than issue a command, Calvin says, he enters into a consultation. "God certainly might here command by his bare word what he wished to be done: but he chose to give this tribute to the excellency of man."<sup>177</sup> This is a common

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<sup>173</sup> *ibid*, p 74

<sup>174</sup> See Greene-McCreight *Ad Litteram* (New York: Peter Lang 1999) p 112 for a suggestion concerning the hermeneutical significance of this.

<sup>175</sup> CC vol 1 p 76

<sup>176</sup> *ibid*, p 90

<sup>177</sup> *ibid*, p 91

theme especially in relation to creation, in commenting on Psalm 33:6 he speaks of God creating by his Word without any aid or other means.<sup>178</sup>

God's speaking is not only powerful, that is, it is an act by which things are accomplished, it is also authoritative. Power achieves, authority determines; the first has to do with 'might', the second with 'right'. Writing to Cardinal Sadeleto, in response to his letter to the citizens of Geneva (1539), Calvin first establishes that God's people are those who hear the Word of God, who listen to the voice of their Shepherd. This is at the root of the Genevan rejection of the rules imposed by the Church of Rome and their submission to the rule of God's word. Calvin asks, "... why is the preaching of the gospel so often styled the kingdom of God", to which there can be but one answer; "it is the sceptre by which the heavenly King rules his people."<sup>179</sup> The authoritative nature of God speaking is also made clear from a more obvious quarter. Preaching on the Decalogue as he worked through the book of Deuteronomy, Calvin spoke concerning the "law which the Lord has proclaimed to you", not being given for information only but for personal reformation, in order that "God may approve of the subjection which we render to him."<sup>180</sup>

On Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1555, as part of the same series of sermons on Deuteronomy, Calvin preached on chapter 4 verses 10 to 14. This sermon reveals another aspect of his understanding of divine speech. In the course of expounding verse 12, "You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice", he says:

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<sup>178</sup> CC vol4 p 542

<sup>179</sup> T&T vol 1 p 36

<sup>180</sup> *Sermons on the Ten Commandments* p 43

Let us have God's word as a certain mark that he sitteth in the middle of us, and is [always] at hand with us. After that manner must we think, if we will not err: for the true mark for all the faithful to shoot at, when they assemble together in the name of God, is to have his voice as a warrant of the presence of his majesty.<sup>181</sup>

The notion of God being present in and through his word is common in Scripture, as it is in Calvin's thought. Preaching on the Epistle to the Ephesians in 1559 he can say, "Therefore when the gospel is preached among us, God's applying himself to our weakness is as much as if he came down to us himself."<sup>182</sup> This idea is echoed in the *Institutes* when he says:

Believers were bidden of old to seek the face of God in the sanctuary as is oftentimes repeated in the law for no other reason than that for them the teaching of the law and the exhortations of the prophets were a living image of God, just as Paul asserts that in his preaching the glory of God shines in the face of Christ.<sup>183</sup>

It can be seen from this brief overview of some of Calvin's writings that speech is a primary and continuing activity of God - and behind his speech stands the authority of the person. A number of elements of Calvin's perspective on divine speech have been noted so far: First, God accommodates his speech to the capacity of humanity. The purpose behind this accommodated speech is to make possible an ordered and intimate relationship between God and humankind. Further, God's speech is dynamic, effective; it can be viewed as an act. Finally God is the guarantor of his speech, giving it personal backing especially in terms of authority, truth and commitment. This is not an exhaustive description of Calvin's understanding of divine speech, but does represent the essential elements of it. He is quite clear that:

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<sup>181</sup> J Calvin, *Sermons On Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1987 Facsimile of 1583 edition, spelling modernised) pp 131&132

<sup>182</sup> J Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1973 revised translation) p 376

<sup>183</sup> *Inst* pp 1018&1019 (4.1.5)



This is the principle that distinguishes our religion from all others that we know that God has spoken to us and are fully convinced that the prophets did not speak of themselves, but as organs of the Holy Spirit uttered only that which they had been commissioned from heaven to declare.<sup>184</sup>

With particular reference to Old Testament theophanies Edward Dowey says, “Here, as everywhere in Calvin's theology, the only successful medium of intercourse between God and fallen man is the word.”<sup>185</sup> And this word not only conveys information, about God's nature, purposes and will, but also accomplishes God's intentions. One of Calvin's chief paradigms for God speaking is that of his word of promise. He develops a theology of promise that encompasses both Old and New Testament<sup>186</sup> and God's ordering of the future.<sup>187</sup> He says of God for example "he not only testifies that he was, but also promised that he would ever be, their God"<sup>188</sup>. And of Christ he says, "we enjoy Christ only as we embrace him clad in his own promises."<sup>189</sup> THL Parker in his book *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, draws the link between God's word of promise and the covenant, for speech binds persons together. “When, therefore, God spoke his word . . . of promise and life to his people, he by that act bound himself to them to himself, in unity. And unity with God means eternal life.”<sup>190</sup> Here again to provide any adequate description of the speech of God the idea of action must be introduced. For Calvin, this idea cannot be separated from the work of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore illumined by his [the Holy Spirit's] power, we believe that neither by our own nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human

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<sup>184</sup> *CNTC* vol 10 p 330

<sup>185</sup> E Dowey, E. *Knowledge of God* p 13

<sup>186</sup> See eg *Inst* 2.7.2 & 10

<sup>187</sup> See particularly *Inst* 3.25.1-12

<sup>188</sup> *Inst*, p 435 (2.10.9)

<sup>189</sup> *Inst*, p 426 (2.9.3)

<sup>190</sup> THL Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh T & T Clark 1986) p 49

judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it had flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men... By this power we are drawn and inflamed, knowing and willing to obey him, yet also more vitally and more effectively than by mere human willing and knowing.<sup>191</sup>

In the light of the material discussed a broad summary can now be attempted. The final edition of the *Institutes* has a major trajectory which leads from raising the question of how we know God, through the doctrines of revelation and redemption and the application of both of these to humanity by the work of the Holy Spirit, to the great eschatological outcome. That is, the perfect knowledge of God, which is summed up in Book 3 and Chapter 25 as union with Christ eternally through the resurrection. It is clear that Calvin sees God as a speaking God and that there is some correspondence between divine and human speech, especially in terms of a relationship forming activity. Further consideration of the means by which, for Calvin, this communication is achieved is needed.

Returning to the original question with which this chapter began – ‘What is speaking for?’ - it is possible to see in human speech some imaging of divine speech. Along with the continuity, however, there are some discontinuities. These can be summed up succinctly in the words of Oliver Millet, who characterizes the distinctives of God’s speech as “majestic” and “accommodated”. Within these descriptions he takes into account the power and authority of the speaker as well as the grace.<sup>192</sup> When the question is asked of God (What is speaking for?) a trajectory similar to the one outlined above in relation to the flow of argument in the *Institutes* would appear to be a possible way of framing an answer. For

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<sup>191</sup> *Inst*, p 80 (1.7.5)

<sup>192</sup> O Millet, *Calvinet la Dynamique* p 241 - 256

Calvin, it is impossible to speak of revelation without moving into soteriology, pneumatology and eschatology. The words of Benjamin Warfield are consonant with Calvin's view; God's speaking can be conceived of as:

. . . not merely the record of revelations, but as itself a part of the redemptive revelation of God, not merely as a record of the redemptive acts by which God is saving the world, but as one of these redemptive acts, having its own part to play in the great work of establishing and building up the kingdom of God.<sup>193</sup>

If then communication and communion are inextricably linked (to use Alan Torrance's words), there must be a context in which this can happen. It is to an examination of one possible context that the next two chapters of this study turns.

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<sup>193</sup> BB Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration* (New York: Oxford University Press 1927) p 107

## Chapter 2

### A Context for Communication (i)

It has been established in Chapter 1 that Calvin, as a representative of a significant strand in the Christian tradition, does not countenance any major division between the doctrines of revelation and redemption. Their relationship is an organic one; the former naturally growing into the latter. It was also suggested that if these two doctrines are inextricably linked, for communication (revelation) to lead to communion (the outcome of redemption) there must be a context in which this can happen. The question of context is the subject of the next two chapters. We will seek to argue that within the design plan of God, the doctrine of humanity's creation in the image of God is an, if not the, determining factor in providing that context. It will be shown that this doctrine provides the foundation for the relationship between humanity and God, between Creator and creature.

A common-sense assumption is that speaking presupposes a listener, a receiver, a conversation partner. Basil Mitchell once said that, "there is an obvious gap in a form of theism in which God, having made a world of rational creatures able to love and worship him, did not in some way communicate with them."<sup>1</sup> He was pointing to a basic assumption in theological thinking, that humanity can relate to God, which is presupposed in almost every religious quest. James Barr applies a not dissimilar insight to the understanding of the Old Testament. First of all he claims that,

In so far as it is good to use the term 'revelation' at all, it is entirely true to say that in the Old Testament revelation is by verbal communication as to say that it is by

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<sup>1</sup> B Mitchell & M Wiles, 'Does Christianity need a Revelation?' *Theology* March 1980 p 103

acts in history. . . When we speak of the highly personal nature of the Old Testament God, it is very largely upon the verbal character of his communication with man that we are relying. The acts are meaningful because they are set with this frame of verbal communication . . . A God who acted in history would be a mysterious supra-personal fate if the action was not linked with this verbal conversation.<sup>2</sup>

Barr also makes a distinction between the ‘appearing’ of God and the ‘speaking’ of God; the former is limited and ambiguous in his view, while the latter is when “...God really meets with man on his own level and directly.”<sup>3</sup>

In chapter one, we have seen that for Calvin speaking is essential to relationship both within humanity and between humanity and God. So that people can “gather more closely and intimately” to him, he instructs them. God “. . . not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips.”<sup>4</sup> Many theologians, both before and after Calvin, concur with his assessment; this is evidenced in the many formulations of the doctrine of revelation across the centuries of Christian history.

Calvin acknowledges that although there may be the possibility of some understanding of the creator and his purposes through creation, communication through Scripture is needed for clear knowledge. He famously sums this up in the following words,

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused

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<sup>2</sup> J Barr, *Old & New in Interpretation* (London: SCM Press 1966) pp 77-8

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* p78

<sup>4</sup> *Inst*, p 70 (1.6.1)

knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.<sup>5</sup>

Calvin nowhere addresses the question of whether and how God can speak, as there was a general consensus in his day that he did and could. His concern was more that God does speak through Scripture and that his word should be clearly heard. His desire was that people should listen attentively and to “embrace what it pleases God there to witness of himself.”<sup>6</sup> This understanding of God speaking, principally through Scripture, is inextricably bound to the work of the Holy Spirit and the inward testimony he gives, as has been shown in chapter 1. As Calvin deals with this whole notion of God speaking through Scripture, he ranges across the whole canon of Scripture in the quotations and allusions he uses. He also moves into contemporary application, viewing his own generation as those who also can hear and respond to what is being said in Scripture.

Behind his thinking is a presupposition that is similar to the one articulated by Mitchell and Barr above. There must exist, what can be called, a context for communication. There must be a speaker and listeners. This has been made clear by many scholars working in the fields of literature, linguistics and philosophy of language. Two brief examples can be given: first from the writings of M Bakhtin. When seeking to analyse and define ‘speech genres’ he writes, “Language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity.” Each of these areas determines certain elements of the utterances, these he identifies as, “thematic content, style and compositional structure.” These three aspects “are inseparably linked to the *whole* nature of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of

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<sup>5</sup> *Inst* 1.6.1

<sup>6</sup> *Inst* 1.6.2

communication.”<sup>7</sup> Here Bakhtin underlines the crucial role that context (“the particular sphere of communication”) has in determining the shape and content of the utterances. A second example can be taken from the work of Gene Green who seeks to apply some of the insights of Relevance Theory to biblical studies, especially New Testament interpretation. He suggests that the Relevance Theory model is useful for understanding “how texts and contexts, authors and readers work together in the communication of meaning.” He goes on to say,

A semiotic approach to communication has been a dominant paradigm in our discipline, but it strains to explain this relationship and frequently presents an uncomfortable juxtaposition of textual and contextual considerations. Relevance Theory offers a pragmatic model of communication which argues that the recovery of contextual information is essential for comprehension and that communication is largely an inferential process, not simply a matter of encoding and decoding ...The theory also presents a framework for understanding the respective roles of authors and readers as they interact with language and contexts in communication. According to RT, speakers and authors, whether modern or ancient, seek to modify the cognitive environment of their hearers or readers.<sup>8</sup>

For Relevance Theory, however, context has a particular focus. It is not concerned with the external environment of those involved in communication, so much as their “assumptions about the world” or “cognitive environment”. “The notion of ‘cognitive environment’ takes into account the various external factors but places the emphasis on the information they provide and its mental availability for the interpretation process.”<sup>9</sup> Successful

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<sup>7</sup> M Bakhtin, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press 1986) p60

<sup>8</sup> G Green, in *The Linguist as Pedagogue* SE Porter & MB O'Donnell eds (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press 2009) p 218

<sup>9</sup> E-A Gutt *Translation and Relevance* (Manchester St Jerome Publishing 2000) p 27

communication happens when there is “part of the cognitive environment that is *mutually shared* between communicator and audience.”<sup>10</sup> Within that ‘mutual cognitive environment’, the modifications to a person’s assumptions about the world happen “not simply because of the propositional context of the utterance alone, not from the contextual assumptions alone,” but by inference from both of these factors.<sup>11</sup> The agents in communication both bear responsibility in making it effective and relevant. The speaker must make what they intend to convey accessible to the hearers and readers. The hearers/readers must seek to connect with the ‘world’ of the speaker. This inevitably involves engagement in a ‘mutual cognitive environment’ between persons. Dick Leith and George Myerson seek to maintain the personal by using the term ‘address’ rather than communication. Communication is, for them, “often linked in people’s minds with the unproblematic ‘transfer’ of ‘information’ from one person to another”. Whereas in ‘address’, “language is always ‘addressed’ to someone else even if that someone is not always immediately present, or is actually unknown or imagined.”<sup>12</sup>

A possible objection may be raised at this point that speaking is not always used for the purpose of communication. Sometimes language, speech, is used as a mode of self-expression, with no other intention involved. There is, of course, an element of self-expression in most communication, as the speaker’s personality, desires and culture (to name a few elements) are enlisted to engage and persuade the hearer. Within the literature of the Bible, it is possible to discern a spectrum that has “transmissive communication” at one end and “expressive communication” at the other.<sup>13</sup> According to Jeanine Brown, the

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* p29 see also D Sperber & D Wilson, *Relevance* (Oxford: Blackwell 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 1995) pp108-117

<sup>12</sup> D Leith & G Myerson, *Power of Address* (London: Routledge 1989) p xiii

<sup>13</sup> JK Brown explains these terms in the following way: “[I]n transmissive communication the personal, transactional nature of the communicative act is emphasized (as in a letter). . . . In expressive communication . . . the author generates a textual world, inviting readers to experience it



New Testament Epistles would be towards the transmissive end of the spectrum and the poetry of some Proverbs and Psalms would be at the other end. Biblical narratives, she suggests, would occupy something of the middle ground between these two. Concerning the more expressive genres in Scripture she says,

In spite of the variety of ways poetry is used in the Bible, I believe we can make the generalisation that biblical poetry is not purely expressive. Even some of the most personal and poignant of lament psalms, for example, are still, at least by virtue of their inclusion in the Psalter, meant for communication as well as expression.<sup>14</sup>

Whether or not contrary cases can be identified, they do not substantially affect the overall proposition that speaking is a person-to-person activity within a shared (to at least some degree) cognitive environment.

Over a hundred years ago, Abraham Kuyper made a similar observation concerning revelation; he first argues that the "...knowledge of God did not arise from our observation of God but from self-communication on the part of God." He then observes that "...all revelation assumes (1) one who reveals Himself; (2) one to whom he reveals Himself; and (3) the possibility of the required relation between the two."<sup>15</sup> In his analysis of revelation, one element of Kuyper's argument is that humanity (and particularly sinful humanity) has to be taken into account.

Although it is clear from the scriptural witness that God does, in some sense, address the whole of his creation; it is clear also that there is a particular form of address, of communication with human beings. This raises the question of what, therefore, is distinctive

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with their minds eye (as in a narrative and poem)." *Scripture as Communication* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2007) p 75

<sup>14</sup> *ibid* p 76 n 55

<sup>15</sup> A Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1954) p 257

about humankind? To answer this question, Kuyper sets out three propositions as follows, the third being the most pertinent to the subject at hand:

1 “God – reveals Himself for His own sake, and not in behalf of man.”

2 “Divine Revelation assumes a creature capable of transforming this revelation into subjective knowledge of God”

3 “Humanity . . . in order to do this, must be adapted by nature, relation and process to interpret what has been revealed as a revelation of God and to reduce it to subjective knowledge of God.”<sup>16</sup>

The first proposition is explained in terms of the knowledge of God being given in revelation not primarily for the benefit of humankind, “but God in his sovereignty takes pleasure *in being known of his creature*.”<sup>17</sup> Kuyper explains that the second proposition is necessary because, if there was no part of creation that was capable of response to God, “...the perfections of God revealed in His creation would not be evident to anyone but God himself. This, however, would be a contradiction in terms,” – a revelation that reveals nothing.<sup>18</sup> The third proposition is the most important for this study. Here, Kuyper argues, in the very creation of humankind there is that special factor that allows for the reception of the knowledge of God (both objectively and subjectively). He suggests that humanity,

“... is the richest instrument in which and by which God reveals himself...not so much on account of his body and his general physical organisation, but chiefly on account of that deepest and most hidden part of his being in which the creaturely reaches its finest and noblest formation...we define it as being both the choicest

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid* pps 258-275. There is a fourth proposition that reads: “That the revelation of God to the sinner remains the same as the revelation of God to man without sin, only with this twofold necessary difference, that formally this disorder in the sinner must be neutralized, and materially the knowledge of God must be extended so as to include the knowledge of God’s relation to the sinner.”

<sup>17</sup> *ibid* p 260

<sup>18</sup> *ibid* p 261

jewel in the diadem of revelation and the instrument by which man transmutes all revelation into *knowledge of God*. Both are expressed in the creation of man after the *image of God*.’’<sup>19</sup>

Judgement can be suspended for the moment on whether or not Kuyper is right in his statement. What he does do, is point to a vital issue in theological anthropology that has exercised thinkers though out the whole of the Christian tradition - that is the nature and purpose of the *imago Dei*. A particular question that needs to be addressed is, if and how an understanding of this concept might provide a perspective on God’s communication with humanity and the context of that communication. To answer this question, a brief survey of the history of the doctrine with its main interpretations will be undertaken. This will be followed by an examination of a contemporary articulation of the doctrine and an initial critique of it.

### **The Image of God in Humanity - an overview**

The views of the doctrine of the image of God in humankind, which have developed in the history of Christian doctrine, find their Biblical basis in a relatively small range of texts. These include, Gen 1:26-28, 5:1 and 9:6 in the Old Testament and 1 Cor.11:7; Col 3:10 and James 3:9 in the New Testament. Further evidence is drawn from such places as Ps.8:5-8 in the OT, and references to Christ as the image of God in the NT (see eg. 2 Cor 4:4 and Col 1:15). Some of these passages will be examined in chapter 3. The purpose here is to first sketch the main views of the doctrine that have been influential in the history of Christian thought. While this sketch follows an historical order, the views outlined are not necessarily exclusive to the period under consideration. In many periods different views have co-existed and some have had periodic revivals.

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid* p 264

The first notable contribution by an early Christian theologian is that of Irenaeus.<sup>20</sup> Born around 130AD, Irenaeus was taught the Christian faith by Polycarp of Smyrna who, according to Irenaeus, had been taught by some apostles and direct witnesses of Christ. He is best known for his book, *Against Heresies*, which is mainly directed against men like Valentinus and Marcion. In this work he deals with the make-up of human beings at various points and his discussion moves between their state before the Fall and their post-Fall condition. One of Irenaeus' great concerns is to deal with the fundamental text of Gen 1:26-28. A major emphasis he makes is the distinction between the terms of 'image' (צִלְמֵ) and 'likeness' (דְּמוּת). The image is seen as the basic natural form of humanity, the "ontic imprint"<sup>21</sup> which makes a human being human. The likeness, however, is viewed as a supernaturally given element or function, enabling a human being to grow in righteousness. In his view Adam was not the fully perfected being that later writers saw (e.g. Augustine & Luther), rather he was a child, immature with the possibility or potential for growth in conformity with the will and holiness of God. Irenaeus' view is one of a number which have been classified as substantive views which identify the image in humanity with a particular substantial element in the human soul which marks out humanity's likeness to God. Commentators often link this substantial view with the prevailing philosophy of the early centuries of Christian thought. So, Middleton says, "[T]his notion of the rational, substantial soul mirroring its divine archetype – which is part of the pervasive influence of Platonism on Christian thought – is nuanced and supplemented in the Latin west by notions such as conscience, spirituality, immortality, freedom, and personhood..."<sup>22</sup> He also comments that in the East there was a more dynamic view akin to Irenaeus' – a growth or progression in its

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. the arguments of D Cairns *The Image of God in Man* (London: Collins 1973) pp 79ff and GA Jonnson, *The Image of God* (Lund: Almqvist & Wiksell 1988) p12

<sup>21</sup> see R Anderson, *On being Human* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1982) pp3-19

<sup>22</sup> J R Middleton, *The Liberating Image* (Grand Rapids Brazos 2005) p19

conformity with God, “a salvific partaking of the divine nature, a process typically called ‘divinization’.”<sup>23</sup> The Irenaean distinction between ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ was followed by many in later eras of the church and because of this became, according to David Cairns, “the unconscious originator of the dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural.”<sup>24</sup> And the danger of this, according to Cairns is to open up a way of salvation, by natural theology, which bypassed Jesus Christ.

It is worth noting briefly that it is not just the soul and one (or all) of its capacities that was seen by some of the Church fathers as the image, or location of the image, of God. Justin Martyr was prepared to assert that “human flesh . . . was also created in the image of God.” The body was “made from the dust of the earth”, but because of its creation by God in his image, it cannot be said to be contemptible. “With this statement he is clearly counteracting the Platonism of his day, in which most sages venerated the immortal but denigrated the imprisoning body.”<sup>25</sup> Although few of the fathers followed Justin on this path, elements of this kind of view do appear elsewhere. Augustine can say that “...the body can function as a witness to the *imago Dei*,” and Origen can point to the upright posture of human beings, as opposed to most other creatures.<sup>26</sup>

Another great representative of the substantive view of the image of God is Augustine. It is of note that he deals with the doctrine in his great treatise on the Trinity. The reason for this is a relatively simple one - even if its outworking is not - and that is because of the revelation of God as Trinity. The image must therefore reflect this triune nature. He moves to a formulation concerning the image in a number of stages beginning with a consideration

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<sup>23</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image* p 20

<sup>24</sup> Cairns, *Image of God* p88

<sup>25</sup> J Van Vliet, *Children of God* (Gottingen Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht 2009)

p42

<sup>26</sup> *ibid* p 43 & references there

of love.<sup>27</sup> His first triad: the lover, the object of love and love itself, is not adequate because it involves an external object – it is not constitutive of persons in and of themselves. Can this be rectified by focussing on self-love, making the lover the object of his or her own love? Augustine thinks not as it really only involves two elements and not three, the lover and the self being loved are one and the same. This moves him nearer his final formulation, as he recognised that “the self cannot love itself unless it knows itself.”<sup>28</sup> Now the triune formulation has become mind, knowledge, and love. This also remains unsatisfactory, however, because knowledge is so often involved with things external to a person; it brings into association with the Trinity things which are not of the essence of it. His final formulation is that of memory, understanding and will (*memoria, intelligentia, voluntas*). *Memoria* is used by Augustine not in the sense of simple recall of the past, but more in reference to the self. Cairns sums up this final formulation in the following way, “... so the memory, which is really the self as a reflective subject, has a perpetual understanding of itself, and love of itself.”<sup>29</sup> Further he says “...in his doctrine of the image he has taken over just so much from the non-Christian thought as will influence the course of his teaching from time to time, and make him suggest a capacity for self-salvation by an interior process of reflection.”<sup>30</sup>

To avoid this dilemma he sometimes asserts the common substantive view of his day locating the image in a particular quality or attribute given to humanity. The rational, reasoning soul is the mark of the image of God that Augustine focuses on in Book 14 of his work *The Trinity*. Even this does not allow him necessarily to escape from the problem of providing an alternative route to salvation outside of the work of Jesus Christ. This is seen

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<sup>27</sup> see Cairns, *Image of God* pp 100ff for an evaluation of this

<sup>28</sup> *ibid* p 89

<sup>29</sup> *ibid* p 102

<sup>30</sup> *ibid* p 104

clearly when he says that the human soul “is able to use reason and intellect in order to understand and behold God.”<sup>31</sup> Charles Sherlock, in his *The Doctrine of Humanity*, seeks to soften this kind of charge made by Cairns. Rather than seeing the steps Augustine takes to come to his final formulation of the doctrine as a series of logical steps eliminating various false possibilities, Sherlock argues that they are a deepening progression whereby a Christian comes to know God. It is viewed by him as a journey “into” God. Concerning the charge that this opens up another possible route of salvation which is dependent on human capabilities, Sherlock suggests that, the journey for Augustine is “possible due only to the work of Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>32</sup> This approach to Augustine is right, to a degree, in that in many places he clearly delineates the inability of humankind to save itself and the efficacy of divine grace in doing so. The problem is that in his search for the image of God in humanity, he allows his trinitarianism to wholly dictate his approach to the doctrine. Seeing or seeking vestiges of the Trinity in humankind affects both his understanding of the biblical witness and his development of the doctrine. A further problem with his view is that it tends to locate the image *in* humankind rather than see humankind *as* the image of God. The implications of these two ways of thinking about the image will be explored in more detail later in the chapter.

The substantive view and the Irenaean distinction between ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ continued to dominate theological thinking through the mediaeval era and beyond. It was expressed clearly by Thomas Aquinas who heightened the dichotomy between the two terms. ‘Image’ was that element possessed by all humanity, the natural image in all. Likeness now became the supernatural image which was lost at the Fall and was restored in Christ. The consensus

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid* p102

<sup>32</sup> C Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity* (Leicester: IVP 1996) p 79

amongst the scholastics was that an original supernatural gift given at creation (*donum superaditum supernaturale*) was lost at the Fall. This original righteousness is what was lost; what remained was the image itself “which remained fundamentally untouched by the ravages of sin.”<sup>33</sup> The corollary of this doctrine was that human beings had the capacity to bring themselves to a place or point where they could be justified. As with Augustine, Aquinas was not seeking to deny divine agency in salvation as the following two examples show:

But Christ by suffering out of love and obedience gave to God more than was required to compensate for the offence of the whole human race. . . And so Christ’s passion was not merely a sufficient but superabundant atonement for the sins of the human race.<sup>34</sup>

So inasmuch as through the Holy Spirit we are made into lovers of God, it is likewise through him that we are led to respond to God’s requests, as the Apostle’s word puts it: “Whoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God”(Rom 8:14).<sup>35</sup>

Rather, Aquinas sought an explanation of the doctrine of the image of God in the context of a theological discipline dominated by philosophical categories – human reason and rationality were concepts close to hand. These allowed humanity to make progress in the knowledge of God in a way that distinguished it from the rest of creation. This element of a deepening knowledge of God makes clear the nature of the reasoning that Aquinas seeks to describe. It is not a ‘stand-alone’ power which is simply rationalistic; it is seen to be a

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<sup>33</sup> Sherlock, *Humanity* p 83

<sup>34</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theolog.* III q48,a,2,c, in MT Clark *An Aquinas Reader* (London Hodder & Stoughton 1972) p 469

<sup>35</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV.22, in *ibid* p301



relational quality as well. Cairns describes it thus, “It is certainly a power, but it is defined by Aquinas, just as by Augustine, in terms of relation to God.”<sup>36</sup>

In the Reformation and post-Reformation era, a radical break was made with scholasticism, a break that followed two divergent paths in particular. The substantive view was continued, but there was a clear rejection of the dichotomy between the ‘image’ and ‘likeness’. Martin Luther stands as a major exemplar of this view. The sixteenth century Socinians provided a clear example of a more radical break. They made the move from the substantive view to a wholly functional view.

Luther’s view is defined here as substantive because of its continuity with a range of other views that can be subsumed under this heading. The common element of these views is the locus of the image of God; it is resident within persons, something that is internal – divinely given but part of the very fabric of human being. Luther, without doubt, saw some relational and ethical implications involved in the image in humanity. He was prepared also to admit to the fact that humanity as the image of God had dominion over the animals. The main element of his view was, however, that a certain attribute or quality was given in the creation of humankind which constituted the image – and that can be expressed simply as “original righteousness”. The starting point for Luther’s radical break with earlier tradition is his denial of any difference between the terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness’. In the wake of the revival of the classical languages in that era, Luther could see that these two terms together represented a typical example of Hebrew parallelism rather than a progression or distinction between them.<sup>37</sup> In the same lecture in which he rejects that dichotomy he also questions the value of both Augustine and Aquinas’ views. He sees a danger in Augustine in that

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<sup>36</sup> Cairns, *Image of God* p 120

<sup>37</sup> see E Brunner, *Man in Revolt* (London: Lutterworth 1939)pp 93&94

misunderstanding could easily arise over humanity's ability to conform itself to the image of God. His sharper criticism is reserved for Aquinas who is seen by Luther as promoting the ability of all people to merit justification before God, because the image of God within them allows them to will and to do what is right. This contradicts the basic reformation principle expounded by Luther, the principle of *sola fide*. It attributes to humankind an ability of the will that is both inappropriate and wrong-headed. He argues that the ability to will what is good as being a natural part of humanity is an erroneous doctrine of the scholastics. "The error is in this. Will remains in the devil; it remains in heretics. I admit this is natural. But *that* will is not good, nor the intellect right nor does it remain enlightened."<sup>38</sup>

The question needs to be asked if the image is completely eradicated in fallen humanity. Many of Luther's statements and the implication of his view of fallen humanity seem to clearly say that it is completely lost. While eschewing any difference between 'image' and 'likeness'; Luther and some other Reformers were willing to speak of "a 'relic' of divine likeness."<sup>39</sup> This relic consisted of mere fragments of the image, not specific qualities that could not be identified as the image of God in humanity. During the course of his lectures on Genesis, he is faced with the difficulty of explaining Genesis 9:6, which attributes a dignity and value to human beings because they are made in the image of God. Luther evades the plain meaning of this text by explaining that the image remains God's intention for humankind, but that it is not present in them in any real or meaningful sense. Calvin has a more nuanced view of the 'relic' that will be discussed in the next chapter. Luther is aware of the question of how the intention of God concerning his image in humanity is realised in wholly New Testament terms. He addresses this issue in his lecture on Gen 1:26, where he

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<sup>38</sup> M Luther, sermon on Ps.51 quoted in Cairns *Image of God* p 131

<sup>39</sup> Jónsson, *Image of God* p 13

makes clear that it is only in Christ that the old nature, with its loss of original righteousness, can be put off and the new nature, renewed in the image of God, can be put on.<sup>40</sup> As will be seen later, the major problem with Luther's view revolves around his exegesis of the fundamental passages in Genesis and his assumption that the image is primarily a substantial element in humanity.

The post-Reformation period heralded another major turn away from the substantive views which had prevailed for over a millennium. The chief architects of this change were the Socinians, named after two Italian lay-theologians; Laelius Socinus (1525-62) and his nephew Faustus (1539-1604). The elder Socinus met and debated with many of the continental reformers and wrote a *Confession of Faith* in 1555, which was a basically orthodox statement. His nephew, Faustus, built on his work and raised issues that departed from the Reformation stance in the areas of Christology, anthropology and the doctrine of Scripture. His views found quintessential expression in the Racovian 'Confession' of 1605. The view of the Socinians continued to exercise some influence for the next two hundred years or so. By the nineteenth century they had been absorbed into main line tradition, following the rise of the historical criticism of Scripture. In their distinctive anthropology, they denied any natural immortality to humanity and rejected the notion of original sin. A consequence of this was that they had to reject any substantive definition of the image of God, especially one which involved the concept of 'original righteousness' lost through the Fall. Taking their cue from the immediate content of the Genesis statement concerning the image, they understood it in terms of dominion. This view was not entirely original to them, Jewish tradition had also promoted this notion (see e.g. Ecclesiasticus 17:3-5 & 2 Esdras

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<sup>40</sup> See references to Luther's *Lectures on Genesis* in Cairns, *Image of God* pp128-132 and Brunner, *Man in Revolt* pp 507-510

8:44).<sup>41</sup> Humankind functions as God's representative or delegated ruler in the world. This approach to the image, often designated as the functional view, is not dependant on a Socinian view of human nature and being. Many have subscribed to this view on exegetical and comparative or contextual grounds, seeing evidence for it both in Scripture and in the wider ancient Near Eastern milieu.

With the increase of knowledge of the historical and wider cultural context of the Bible, the functional and wider view, that the image of God refers specifically to humanity's role in the world, has been in the ascendancy during the past two centuries, but with some major dissenters. Gunnlaugur Jónsson in his definitive book, *The Image of God*, traverses a century of Old Testament research on Genesis 1:26-28 (1882-1982) showing the rise of the functional view concerning the dominion of humankind, especially in the light of studies in Assyriology and the history of religion. The main alternative to this view, in the period he considers, is the relational view expounded particularly by Karl Barth during the period 1919-1960. The functional view became the majority view again during the latter part of the period Jónsson considers. Although there have been those who have propounded either a substantive view or the image as bodily-form, Jonnson ends his survey with the conclusion that for modern OT scholarship the only alternatives are the functional or the relational.

In 20<sup>th</sup> century theology, the relational view is almost exclusively linked to Karl Barth by many commentators but as will be shown later there are those who hold to this view without accepting all the ramifications of Barth's understanding of it. The fully developed relational view is part of Barth's later work and its major exposition is found in his *Church Dogmatics* vol 3, Part 1. This represents a movement away from his earlier position, which was

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<sup>41</sup> See further on Intertestamental literature, G Bray 'The Significance of God's Image In Man' *TB* 4 (1995) pp 203-209

basically the Lutheran position, evidenced in his debate with Emil Brunner in *Natural Theology*.<sup>42</sup> The relational view is not wholly original to him as he admits; antecedents of it are found in both Wilhelm Vischer and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Wilhelm Vischer comments on humanity thus:

In every moment creation stands solely by the grace of its Creator. That is true of every creature but pre-eminently of the last, which the Eternal made in His own image, placing it at the head of the world as His “Thou” over against himself . . . So deeply is God concerned that man should be His image, His Thou, that man can only really live as he faces God, lives from God and to God only as Thou and in no sense as I.<sup>43</sup>

Barth wishes to press beyond this and incorporate in his concept of the *imago* some insights of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Of particular importance for Barth is the way that Bonhoeffer explains the image of God in terms of freedom and relatedness. In the first place, for Bonhoeffer, saying “...that in humankind God creates the image of God on earth means that humankind is like God in that it is free.” However, “...in the language of the Bible freedom is not something that people have for themselves but something they have for others.”<sup>44</sup> These ideas are further developed when he says,

. . . freedom is not a quality that can be uncovered; it is not a possession, something to hand, an object; nor is it a form of something to hand; instead it is a relation and nothing else. To be more precise freedom is a relation between two persons. Being free means ‘being-free-for-the-other’, because I am bound to the other. Only by being in relation with the other am I free.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See Middleton, *Liberating Image* pp 22-25

<sup>43</sup> W Vischer *Witness of Old Testament to Christ* ( London: Lutterworth 1949) p 48

<sup>44</sup> D Bonhoeffer, *Creation & Fall* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1997)p 62

<sup>45</sup> *ibid* p 63

These precursors of his view are acknowledged by Barth, although he wishes to take their conclusions further.<sup>46</sup> Barth's development of the doctrine of the *imago* is based on a negative assumption, that is, that in Scripture there is no clear description or statement concerning what the image actually is. The fundamental element of the Christian faith is, for Barth, that God is Triune. This Trinitarian nature of God leads him to say that there is evidence of relationship with the Godhead as early as Genesis 1 and that is seen in the decision to create humanity, pronounced in Genesis 1:26. The encounter and partnership which exists in the Godhead is reflected in humankind made in the image of God. It is important to note that for Barth this relationship or partnership consists of both the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with other human beings.<sup>47</sup> A further step is made in his thinking about the image when he observes in both Genesis 1:27 and 5:1-2 the link is made between humanity as the image of God and the fact that it is constituted of both male and female. The image of God then is particularly to be found in the creation of humankind as male and female. As with the Trinity, so within humanity, there is distinction and harmony - an 'I' and a 'Thou' that confront each other. There are no solitary individuals but persons in relation.<sup>48</sup> No overview of Barth's doctrine of the *Imago* would be complete, however brief, without reference to his Christological emphasis. In the section on *Man as an Object of Theological Knowledge* Barth sums up the most important thesis of the section in this way, "As the man Jesus is Himself the revealing Word of God, He is the source of our knowledge of the nature of man as created by God."<sup>49</sup> In him is the only true knowledge of what humanity is meant to be. There is however a difference between our

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<sup>46</sup> CD III/1 pp 194-5

<sup>47</sup> see CD III/I pp 184-185

<sup>48</sup> see CD III/I p 184

<sup>49</sup> CD III/2 p 41

humanity and his which is indissoluble.<sup>50</sup> And, for Barth, the sum of that true knowledge is that for Jesus, “His being as a man is his work”<sup>51</sup>, that is for others.

Despite the differences that existed between Barth and Emil Brunner earlier in their theological careers there was some coming together in their thinking concerning the image of God in humanity in their later work.<sup>52</sup> Brunner originally wrote in terms of a ‘formal’ and a ‘material’ sense to the image of God in humanity. The formal aspect of the image is that which make a person truly human; that distinguishes a human being from an animal. The material aspect is that by which response is made to God. For Brunner, the former is a permanent feature of humanity and the latter is capable of being lost. An implication of this formal aspect of the image is that human beings are responsible before God. And says Brunner,

He may deny his responsibility, and he may misuse his freedom, but he cannot get rid of his responsibility. Responsibility is part of the unchangeable structure of man’s being. That is: the actual existence of man – of every man, not only the man who believes in Christ – consists in the positive fact that he has been made to respond – to God.<sup>53</sup>

Whatever response a human being makes to God, positive or negative, he or she is in relationship to him. The nature of the response determines, to an extent, the nature of the relationship. The positive, answering response to God is seen by Brunner as the material aspect of the image being present in a human being. He explains it thus,

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<sup>50</sup> see CD III/2 p 222

<sup>51</sup> CD III/2 p 59

<sup>52</sup> see Cairns assessment, *Image of God* p 152

<sup>53</sup> E Brunner *The Christian Doctrine* of creation and Redemption (London: Lutterworth 1952) p 57

The New Testament simply presupposes this fact that man - in his very nature - has been “made in the image of God”; it does not develop this any further. To the Apostles what matters most is the “material” realization of this God-given quality; that is, that man should really give the answer which the Creator intends, the response in which God is honoured, and in which he fully imparts Himself, the response of reverent, grateful love, given not only in words, but in his whole life.<sup>54</sup>

In his later thinking Brunner ‘renounced’ the use of the term ‘formal Imago’;<sup>55</sup> this, however, did not substantially change his formulation of the doctrine.

If relationship to God is given the primary place in Emil Brunner’s thinking concerning the doctrine of the *imago*, he does not neglect to comment on further relational implications. Response to God is also to be accompanied or mirrored by response to neighbours. As the image of God in humanity is what makes it truly human it should be characterized “by the union of human beings in love”.<sup>56</sup>

As was suggested earlier, despite some original, sharp disagreements; there was some convergence in the later work of Barth and Brunner, concerning which four main observations may be made. The first is that in the light of Scriptural statements about the image, no one clear element or quality within humanity can be identified with it. Secondly the image is a permanent aspect of humanity’s created nature – it was not affected by the Fall, in the sense that it continues to distinguish human beings from the rest of creation. It can be observed, thirdly, that they both view the image in relational terms – relationship to

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid* pp57&8

<sup>55</sup> E Brunner, *Man in Revolt* p 513

<sup>56</sup> *ibid* p 106



God and relationship to others. Finally they both acknowledge that any understanding of the image of God and human nature are only properly understood through Christological reflection as opposed to anthropological.

This chapter has sought, so far, to give an overview of the main ways the doctrine of the *imago* has been understood in Christian history. The view most favoured in the Early Church, the substantive view, is now least favoured. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the relational and functional views have vied with each other as the primary interpretation of the evidence. The functional view has gained ground in recent OT scholarship with the rise of comparative and contextual studies bringing data from ancient Near Eastern sources to bear on the subject. A contemporary exposition of the functional view will now be considered and the exclusive claims made for it assessed.

The exposition to be considered is found in Richard Middleton's book, *The Liberating Image*, to which reference has already been made. It is one of the most comprehensive studies produced in recent years and it not only contains detailed analysis of the biblical and ancient Near Eastern data, but it also encompasses historical, theological and ethical considerations concerning the image of God in humankind. Middleton's professed aim is to attempt a rapport between these fields of study, particularly those of systematic and biblical theology. For this reason, its comprehensive advocacy of the functional view of the *imago* from a broad scholarly base, a full review of its arguments and evidence will be given. After some general observations on the book in this chapter, there will be more detailed interaction with its content and approach to the relevant data in Chapter 3. This focus on Middleton's work is deemed necessary, because if his case for the functional view can be sustained, one of the main arguments of this study will need substantial revision.

## **A Contemporary Statement – *The Liberating Image***

Gunnlaugur Jónsson, in his analysis of a century of Old Testament research on the image of God in Genesis 1:26-28, comments in his conclusion that...“it is fairly obvious from our investigation that the scholars’ hidden preunderstanding has not been without influence for their interpretation.”<sup>57</sup> As he remarks, this is not a sensational conclusion, but it is one that is acknowledged by J. Richard Middleton, the author of *The Liberating Image*. In his preface he makes clear that in his own search for a sense of personal identity, his discovery of the idea of humanity as *Imago Dei* assumed great importance for him. As he says it “...soon became the single most seminal theological concept for my own developing self image and one that I have reflected the most intensely on.”<sup>58</sup> He has a very explicit aim in producing his study, it is, “. . . to make Old Testament scholarship on the creation of humanity in God’s image accessible as a resource for theological reflection on human identity and ethics in a world increasingly characterized by brutality and dehumanization.”<sup>59</sup> He approaches this topic by first examining the meaning of the image (part 1); he then explores the wider Near Eastern context (part 2) and finally addresses some implications of the image for ethics (part 3). The following survey will be essentially descriptive and then be followed by discussion of some of the major issues raised (in chapter 3).

### **Part 1 The meaning of the Image**

The first chapter, ‘The Challenge of Interpreting the *Imago Dei*’, addresses the way theologians have approached this doctrine and the texts on which it is based. He notes a

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<sup>57</sup> GA Jónsson *Image of God* p 210

<sup>58</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image*, p10

<sup>59</sup> *ibid*

number of writers who simply assume that “the Bible does not define for us the precise content of the original *imago*.”<sup>60</sup> In this situation many have recourse to extra-biblical paradigms or address speculative questions to resolve the issue, “In what way are humans like God and unlike animals?”<sup>61</sup> He outlines the interpretations that have been given in the three categories that have been discussed above, using substantialistic rather than substantive as that which refers to a particular quality of attribute in human beings. His overview covers briefly some to the same ground as the earlier survey in this chapter. There is, for him, a problem with both the substantialistic and relational interpretations in contemporary theology. They “tend to be found in the writings of systematic theologians” and “simply ignore the massive literature in Old Testament Scholarship on the *Imago Dei* that developed in the last century.”<sup>62</sup> He refers to Gunnlaugur Jónsson’s book as having shown that of the two major views in the past century of Old Testament scholarship, the relational and the functional interpretation, it is the latter which has achieved a ‘virtual consensus’. This consensus is based on exegesis of Gen 1:26 & 27, and the study of Ancient Near Eastern parallels. There is no need, therefore, for any further interaction with the relational interpretation for Middleton and it is only mentioned in passing four or five times.

After stressing the continuing need to harvest the fruit of Old Testament scholarship and apply them to other areas of theological thinking, he goes on to acknowledge the dangers of subjectivity. That is, he is aware that he could be accused of preselecting the meaning of the image and building his thesis upon that presupposed meaning. While citing a number of reasons to doubt the functional reading, because of advocates, with whom he is predisposed

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid* pp 18-19

<sup>61</sup> *ibid*

<sup>62</sup> *ibid* p 24

to differ, he is still prepared to stand by this particular reading of the Genesis 1 text acknowledging that it is “undeniably a *construal*, ineradicably influenced by my own preunderstandings and prejudices.”<sup>63</sup> There is, for Middleton, a positive role for this kind of subjectivity. The tradition to which he belongs, the Calvinian/Kuyperian tradition, has the capacity to alert interpreters both within and outside of that tradition, “to elements of the text that other interpreters are blind to or at least ignore as unimportant.”<sup>64</sup> He views the process he is engaged in as a kind of “postmodern *status quaestionis*”, an approach to the issues which, “partakes of typically postmodern characteristic such as a self-conscious selective, nontotalizing stance and awareness of the plurality and heterogeneity of relevant conversations and of the necessity for disciplinary debordering.”<sup>65</sup> And yet he also wishes to affirm that texts have their own integrity and, therefore, to follow a ‘hermeneutic of mutuality’ – one comes to the text “*precisely to listen to what it is saying*”.<sup>66</sup>

The other chapter in part 1 explores *The Imago Dei in the symbolic world of Genesis 1*. The close examination of the text undertaken is to determine if it does “suggest an interpretation of the image as rule, thus providing exegetical confirmation for the near consensus of opinion in current Old Testament scholarship?”<sup>67</sup> Middleton begins his examination of the text by reviewing the semantic range of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’. The Hebrew words *selem* and *demuth* appear 17 and 25 times respectively in the Hebrew Bible and have gathered around them a number of usages. Image can be used for a cult image or statue (2 Kings 1:18) and for the fleeting passing image of humanity (Ps 39:6). Likeness has a similarly flexible usage, leading him to conclude that they are polysemous and “do not disclose

<sup>63</sup> *ibid* p 37 emphasis in the original

<sup>64</sup> *ibid* p 38

<sup>65</sup> *ibid* p 39

<sup>66</sup> *ibid* p 41

<sup>67</sup> *ibid* p 45

exactly what the resemblance or likeness of humanity to God consists in.”<sup>68</sup> He, therefore, turns to the context in which these words are used and to the syntax in particular.

This raises three issues, which are dealt with in turn – the image seen in humanity as male and female, the question of dominion and the significance of the expression, ‘let us’. The first is dismissed on the grounds that the third line of 1:27 would be a highly unusual form of synonymous parallelism and that the terms themselves are biological rather than social. He sees the emphasis of the statement about male and female as focussed on reproductive fruitfulness to ‘fill the earth’. The second issue cannot be resolved syntactically either. The world ‘rule’ has royal connotations in the Hebrew Bible and is linked to animal life in Genesis 1:26 & 28. For many commentators this implies the domestication of animals. ‘Subdue’ does not possess the same royal links and has a violent emphasis in some contexts, particularly those dealing with other persons. Elsewhere, when used of the land, it may mean no more than ‘to take possession of’. This later meaning is the more likely in Genesis 1:28, according to Middleton, who suggests it “refers, minimally, to the right of humanity to spread over the earth and make it their own.”<sup>69</sup>

How is this idea of rule linked to the image of God? Following DJ Clines, Middleton answers that, “. . . rule may well be grammatically only the purpose and not the definition of the image in 1:26.”<sup>70</sup> Grounds for making a direct link must be found elsewhere. Finally, he turns to the meaning of the statement, ‘*let us* make humanity in *our* image’. Briefly listing possible alternative interpretations, such as the remnant of a polytheistic view, a Trinitarian view or a plurality in the Godhead, or a plural of deliberation or of majesty; he then states his own view. This is that the plural is used in an address to the

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid* p 48

<sup>69</sup> *ibid* p 52

<sup>70</sup> *ibid* p 54

heavenly court. After setting out the exegetical and contextual ground for this claim, he concludes,

This intertextual reading of the plurals in Genesis 1:26 thus suggests the presence of a royal metaphor in the background of the text, in which God is pictured as ruling the cosmos from the heavenly throne room, attended by angelic courtiers and emissaries. The presence of this background metaphor, along with the explicit syntax of 1:26-28, in the context of the functional, purpose-oriented rhetoric of Genesis 1, leads to the exegetical conclusion that the *Imago Dei* refers to humanity's office and role as God's earthly delegates, whose terrestrial task is analogous to that of the heavenly court.<sup>71</sup>

He wishes to qualify this task (or limit it), therefore he adds it is principally done “through the ordinary communal practices of human socio-cultural life.”<sup>72</sup>

Having engaged in this ‘linguistic – syntactical’ study of the primary text, Middleton, seeks to move from ‘exegesis to intertextuality’.<sup>73</sup> The point of this is to determine whether the conclusions reached are corroborated by the immediate context and further selected readings from the Old Testament. His main aim in this section of the book is to determine the portrait of God as it is depicted in these texts and to develop a conception of the nature of creation. The portrait of God is sketched out by reference to three major notions that he finds in the context of Genesis 1:26-28. These are creation by the Word, God as king and God as artisan. His analysis of the commands of God (the divine *fiats*), and the subsequent

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<sup>71</sup> *ibid* pp 59-60

<sup>72</sup> *ibid* p 60

<sup>73</sup> see *ibid* p 60

‘execution reports’ and ‘evaluation reports’ in the creation account lead, him to the conclusion that God is portrayed ‘as supreme in power and authority’.<sup>74</sup>

As a corollary of this use of words to bring all things into being, Middleton makes a link with the covenantal nature of God’s dealing with creation through texts such as Psalm 33, 147 and 148; Genesis 9 and Jeremiah 33. This leads him to consider the portrayal of God as king in this reading of Genesis 1 and its context. While admitting that the royal metaphor is not explicitly used in the Genesis narrative, he suggests that there are a number of implicit indicators of a royal/kingly understanding in the text. These would include the portrayal of absolute power and authority, the plural address of Genesis 1:26 and the delegation of authority to humankind. Power, however, for Middleton is not the last word about the kingly office. To think in that term alone is to assume that the experience of human rulers, which is so often despotic, can simply be read back onto God. So he comes to the other element of the portrayal of God that he wishes to highlight – God as artisan. This concept is integral to the structure of the Genesis 1 account and defines something of the nature of God’s kingly action. The text,

. . . by its careful literary artistry, evokes a creator-God carefully constructing an artful world according to a well-thought out plan for the benefit of creatures. This is a wise artisan, attentive to the details of his craft and pleased with both the stages or process of fabrication (hence the recurring refrain, “God saw that it was good”; Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21,35) and the overall outcome (which God judges “very good”; Genesis 1:31) These refrains thus serve to indicate not only

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<sup>74</sup> *ibid* p 66

the obedience of creatures to the creator-king, but also the satisfaction of the divine artisan with his workmanship.<sup>75</sup>

A final line of enquiry is undertaken to complete the examination of the Genesis creation account and that is to ask and answer the question, ‘What is God making?’ The simple answer is, a world, but Middleton wishes to enquire further and ask questions about the nature of the world being created. Moving from the commonly assumed understanding of the cosmos as a building, a range of Old Testament texts are examined which use building metaphors concerning the world. These texts lead him to the conclusion that the underlying OT picture is that “of a stable, structured, habitable world constituted in response to God’s royal decrees.”<sup>76</sup> Pursuing the question further he then addresses the issue of what kind of building is portrayed in the Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern parallels, suggesting that the answer is that God is building a temple. As evidence he adduces, for example, the oracle by Isaiah (66:1-2), which is generally considered to be a question of the post-exilic concentration on the building a physical temple. In this text the focus is on the whole cosmos as the dwelling-place of God and not merely a physical construction as earth. Elsewhere in Isaiah there is more evidence for this notion, particularly the ‘Temple vision’ of chapter 6 with its use of the name of the ‘Lord of hosts’ for God, which Middleton links to Genesis 1 and the idea of heavenly court, in his understanding of verse 26.<sup>77</sup> Another crucial piece of evidence, in his estimation, is the use of a sevenfold pattern in the narratives concerned with both the tabernacle and the temple.<sup>78</sup> The other major element of congruence, between the creation narrative and the later significance of the temple is seen in

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<sup>75</sup> *ibid* p 77

<sup>76</sup> *ibid* p 81

<sup>77</sup> *ibid* p 82 & refs to Meltinger, *In search of God*, pp 127-153

<sup>78</sup> *ibid* pp 83-87



the links that can be drawn between them in the use of the term *ruach*. The spirit of God symbolises the immanence or presence of God in both tabernacle and temple.<sup>79</sup>

The overall conclusion to this section of the book, examining the *Imago Dei* in its biblical context, is that the “royal-functional reading . . . is . . . essentially confirmed.”<sup>80</sup> Humanity is like God as it exercises royal power on earth, it is marked out from the rest of creation by being given delegated power – a share in God’s rule over the world.<sup>81</sup> This functional view is nuanced by Middleton to include the notion of a priestly dimension and of humanity as artisans, shapers of the world, imitating God’s own careful and creative activity.

## **Part 2 The Social Context of the Image**

In the second major section of the book (pages 93-231) Middleton turns the focus away from an examination of the biblical text to a wider view of its setting in the ancient Near East. He looks first at the ancient Near Eastern background to the *imago*, then to the ‘matrix of Mesopotamian ideology’<sup>82</sup> and finally to the way that Genesis 1-11 can be seen as a critique of that ideology. This section and the final one will be dealt with more briefly than the first, as they seek to work out some of the implications of the image of God in the light of the wider cultural background in the ancient and modern (or post-modern) world. Four possible sets of data are commonly found in the literature of the ancient Near East, which offer some parallels with the concept of the *imago* in Genesis 1. Each of these will be outlined briefly in turn. Since the discovery and publication of the *Gilgamesh Epic* many scholars have commented on the fact that the story speaks of one, Enkidu, who is created as

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<sup>79</sup> *ibid* pp 85-88

<sup>80</sup> *ibid* p 88

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*, where these two ideas are spelled out

<sup>82</sup> Title of Chapter 4

a counterpart for Gilgamesh. The problem with linking this idea with Genesis 1 is that no clear agreement exists amongst scholars as to the way the Akkadian term *zikru* should be translated. Having reviewed the different options, Middleton concludes that, “it would be extremely unwise to treat the *Gilgamesh Epic* as a reliable indicator of the meaning of the *Imago Dei* in Genesis.”<sup>83</sup> A second set of data comes from Egyptian wisdom texts (*Instruction for Merikare* and *Instruction for Ani*) both deal with the creation of human beings. Although certain parallels can be adduced, it is unlikely that these Egyptian texts influence Genesis 1. Middleton gives three reasons for this judgement. First there is no significant overlap historically between this literature and the life of the nation of Israel. Secondly, this literature exercised no significant influence on later Egyptian literature, especially creation accounts. Thirdly, the Egyptian writings speak of creation from the body of the god in question – an alien notion to Genesis 1. Data from both Egypt and Mesopotamia form the third set of possible parallels that Middleton examines. Common to both areas are records of kings who set up images of themselves in distant lands that they have conquered. These images serve a basic function in that they represent the king and act as a reminder of his authority. The final set of data analysed by Middleton involves texts that make some direct reference to the king as the image of a god. In the Egyptian context they are also seen to bear implications related to the divinity of the pharaoh. The pharaoh himself has a cultic function that could also be associated with any image, so his image carried similar connotations. “The king as the living image of god was like the cult statue, a place where the god manifested himself and was a primary means by which the deity worked on earth.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *ibid* p 99

<sup>84</sup> Curtis quoted in *ibid* p 110

Although there is less physical evidence from Mesopotamia there is still some data that indicates both the king and sometimes the priest were seen as the image of God. One example offered by Middleton, that of the Assyrian king Tukulti-Minurta 1 dates from the thirteenth century B.C. A number of other texts come from the seventh century, which may be of significance for the formation of the Genesis account of creation.<sup>85</sup> The most likely understanding of these texts, for Middleton, is a functional analogy of the image or the relationship between the king/priest and the god.

The issue Middleton next addresses is which ideology most influenced ancient Israel? In debate with Edward Curtis, whose PhD thesis, “Man as the image of God in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Parallels” (Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1984) favoured an Egyptian influence; he argues that there is enough evidence to suggest that the “. . . Mesopotamian royal ideology cannot be disqualified a priori, on either archaeological or conceptual grounds, as a potential conduit of the image of God from the ancient Near East to Genesis 1.”<sup>86</sup>

The cumulative case that Middleton assembles for the plausibility of Mesopotamian influence includes not only the specific texts which speak of king or priest as the image of God, but also the broader area of the creation and flood accounts which existed. Unlike the Egyptian accounts, those in Mesopotamia include some narrative concerned with the creation of human beings. Examples of this can be drawn from the *Gilgamesh Epic*, the *Atrahasis Epic* and the *Babylonian Theodicy*. Similarly the flood accounts of *Gilgamesh*, *Atrahasis* and the *Eridu Genesis* have narrative and structural features that are found in Genesis 1-9. Finally he turns to examine the question of a possible date when this influence might have passed from Mesopotamian sources to Israelite constructions of primeval

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<sup>85</sup> see below

<sup>86</sup> *ibid* p 129

history. He frames the question in this way, is there “a neo-Babylonian Exilic background for the *Imago Dei*?”<sup>87</sup> He asserts the possibility of a royal ideology based on ‘image of god’ texts being extant in the sixth century. Documentary evidence points in this direction. If the author of the Genesis account wrote at this period or later (as would be the case if the hypothesis that assigns the creation account to P is valid) there would be the clear possibility of knowledge of and influence by these accounts. Even if Genesis 1 was written earlier, there would have been long-standing Mesopotamian traditions upon which the author could have drawn. Middleton questions a number of the arguments for dating P in the exilic period and believes it “would be unwise for us to limit ourselves to any exilic context for the purpose of interpreting the *imago Dei*. Therefore, he proposes to pursue,

. . . what is no more than a plausible scenario, namely that the author of Genesis 1 (wherever he lived) was acquainted (in either oral or written form) with the Mesopotamian notion of the king as image of a god (as a particular crystallization of royal ideology) and that he intentionally challenged this notion with the claim that all humanity was made in God’s image.<sup>88</sup>

In chapter 4, “The Matrix of Mesopotamian Ideology”, Middleton examines further the exact nature of that ideology. He offers two definitions of ideology:

1) the ideas which “form a coherent worldview that commends or shapes specific patterns of behaviour and has historically functioned to legitimate the social order or political arrangement of actual societies in history.”

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<sup>87</sup> *ibid* p 136

<sup>88</sup> *ibid* p 145

2) A more pejorative sense in which an ideology comprises “false or deceptive ideas that underwrite the oppressive circumstances of a people and serve as mystification or rationalization of these circumstances.”<sup>89</sup>

While acknowledging that his analysis of Mesopotamia royal-ideology is an attempt at working within the first of these definitions, because he sees this ideology as essentially unjust and open to criticism from a biblical perspective, his own critique may be judged to fall within the second definition. He proceeds to an analysis of a number of Mesopotamian creature accounts – *Enuma Elish*, *Atrahasis Epic*, *Enki and Ninmah*, *Ewe and Wheat* and the text known as KAR 4. It is beyond the purpose of this study to consider this analysis in detail, it is sufficient to note the overall conclusions of ancient Near Eastern scholars whom he summarises by saying that “the cuneiform literature everywhere agrees that people were created to do the work the gods were tired of doing and to provide for the gods’ needs.”<sup>90</sup> The issue here, however, is not just one at a (relatively) simple theological level. It also has socio-political implications as well and this leads HWF Saggs to suggest that the creation myths were, “not basically a comment on the nature a man [as an abstract doctrine] but as an explanation of a particular social system, heavily dependent upon communal irrigation and agriculture, for which the gods’ estates were primary foci of administration.”<sup>91</sup>

An examination of the creation stories reinforces this view, according to Middleton. The main purpose of humanity, in its creation and role, was to serve gods. And by extension this meant, to serve the king who is the image, the representative of the gods. The social order that he dictates reflects the will of the gods for human society. Some have attempted to give

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<sup>89</sup> *ibid* p 148

<sup>90</sup> *ibid* p 166

<sup>91</sup> quoted in *ibid* p 167

a more positive nature to human creation by pointing to one of the elements of that creation. Noting that humankind is made in part from divine blood, it has been suggested that this gives a dignity to humanity. This interpretation is unlikely however, as the blood spilt in the *Enuma Elish* story is not seen as divine. Nowhere is the slain Qingu listed amongst the gods and Middleton suggests that a god that had been slaughtered and becomes part of the origins of humanity hardly adds dignity to the nature of humankind. He suggests, rather, that this story (with its counterpart in the *Atrahasis Epic*) point to a devaluation of human beings. Against this background he turns to what he sees as the ideological critique that Genesis 1-11 offers.<sup>92</sup>

The primary contention Middleton seeks to maintain concerning the *primaeval* history of Genesis 1-11 vis-à-vis the creation myths of Mesopotamia, is not one of a simple distinction between the two. Rather he seeks to assert that the Genesis narrative “may be fruitfully understood as intentionally subversive literature, utilizing a distinctive vision of the human condition to call into question central elements of Mesopotamian ideology.”<sup>93</sup> Conscious of the current scholarly climate, which views with suspicion sweeping claims for the distinctiveness of Israel or the OT, he aims at a ‘contextual’ reading. This takes into account both the context of other written material in the ancient Near East and also the “text’s rootage in a particular social context” which will help uncover the text’s social function, “which may be to express and thus legitimate the current social order or to propose a critical alternative to the status quo.”<sup>94</sup> Following Walter Brueggemann and in agreement with Frank Moore Cross, Middleton is not so concerned with what he describes as “the unique

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<sup>92</sup> *ibid* chap 5

<sup>93</sup> *ibid* p 186

<sup>94</sup> *ibid* p 191

and unrecoverable *hapax* that actually happened”, and therefore is not over-concerned about “defining too specifically the (singular) historical context of Genesis 1.” Rather he wishes to use “ideologically sophisticated, sociological reappropriations of the notion of Israel’s distinctiveness” which “focuses not on free-floating theological claims about the supposed arena of divine action (nature or history) but on what sort of social order these claims legitimate or generate.”<sup>95</sup>

The question to be addressed now, for Middleton, is how does the Genesis narrative (1-11) undermine or undo the ideology of Mesopotamia. In the first place, he asserts, it affirms human agency. Humanity made in the image of God is a democratization of power, not seen solely in the hands of the few, as in Mesopotamia, but the privilege of all. With agency or power comes responsibility, again adding dignity to humankind. Further, he observes, “there is no mandate in Genesis 1 for humans to rule each other.” Indeed, “[W]hatever interhuman hierarchies of power may have developed in human history, these are relativized by Genesis 1 which suggests that such hierarchies are not grounded in God’s creational intent.”<sup>96</sup>

The way Genesis 1 speaks of the image also indicates the possibility of a polemic against a priestly hierarchy. In this he follows and builds on the work of Phyllis Bird who contests the scholarly consensus that the creation account is the work of P. While Bird suggests that the shared image, between male and female, was never intended to be statement of equality but to be applied “exclusively or paradigmatically to men”, Middleton disputes this on the grounds that “...it is unclear how a text that attributes the *Imago Dei* explicitly to ‘male and female’ (1:27) could be originally intended, or *legitimately* taken, as referring only to

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<sup>95</sup> *ibid* p 193

<sup>96</sup> *ibid* p 205

man.”<sup>97</sup> He not only thinks that image implies no hierarchy between man and woman, but also develops the thought about no priestly hierarchy in two ways. One is that humanity, as the image, have equal access to God and, therefore, no mediation is necessary. The second development is to see this in opposition to the cultic order in Mesopotamia. There is, in the Genesis 1 account, no need for “institutional mediation of God’s presence by either kings or priests” and no “mediation of the divine through cult images as practised ...in Mesopotamia.”<sup>98</sup> Within the Genesis creation account (1:1 – 2:4a), he also sees significance in the notion of divine rest. This is not “the abdication of a petty deity from burdensome task”; rather it is the point where humanity is “entrusted with nothing less than *God’s own proper work*, as the creator’s authorized representatives on earth.”<sup>99</sup>

The evidence from the creation account is further corroborated by the rest of the *primaeval* history (Genesis 1-11). Middleton takes the references to the image of God in Genesis 5:1 and 9:6 to be indicators of an unbroken continuation of the image in humanity. This is in contradistinction to many ancient Near Eastern accounts that speak of the flood and the second or subsequent endowment of human beings, especially kings, for their office and role in the world. He also refers to the work of Tikva Frymer-Kensky, who shows how the scriptural account transforms earlier myths. In Sumerian myths she argues, “the gods provide humanity with all the essentials of human civilization.” The Bible, however, shows that, “[T]he human being, a creature created by God, is the initiator and creator of its own culture.”<sup>100</sup> The *primaeval* history also has a perspective on the misuse of power. A possible catalogue, according to Middleton is murder (4:17), polygamy (4:19), revenge killing (4:23-24) and incest (9:21 and 22, cf. Lev. 18:7). The flood narrative particularly highlights this

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<sup>97</sup> *ibid* pp 205&206

<sup>98</sup> *ibid* p 207

<sup>99</sup> *ibid* p 212

<sup>100</sup> quoted in *ibid* pp 217&218



aspect of the early history and its contrast with ancient Near Eastern accounts. In Genesis 6, as the human race fills the earth, the problem is not with over population (and noise) as it is in the Mesopotamian accounts. It is much more to do with the corruption and pollution they bring to the earth – they fill the earth with violence. The response of the gods, in the *Atrahasis Epic*, is the flood as a population limitation exercise. In the Genesis account it is a response to corruption and violence and is seen as restorative.

Whereas the *Atrahasis Epic* concludes with the gods decreeing various population control measures for the human race, Genesis 9 contains a prohibition against murder, the first explicit articulation of law in the canonical narrative. Not only is this prohibition explicitly connected, with the *Imago Dei* in 9:6, but its function is precisely to limit or constrain human violence.<sup>101</sup>

Although humanity in the image of God has real power and agency, this is “tragically being exercised against other human beings instead of used cooperatively in stewardship of the earth.”<sup>102</sup>

The final story of the early history, the Tower of Babel, is seen to be both a restorative and redemptive action by God. Restorative in that it clashes with a possible Mesopotamian backdrop, where, in its hubris, human power seeks to impose unity and a single language. The confusion of language in Genesis 11 reverses “an unhealthy, monolithic movement towards imposed homogeneity.”<sup>103</sup> The redemptive aspect is, according to Middleton, seen in the scattering of people. In the face of the threat to the human race (imperial coercion) humanity is enabled to fulfil its original commission as the image of God to fill the earth (Genesis 1:28). Genesis 1-11, therefore, depicts human beings as significant agents “able to

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<sup>101</sup> *ibid* p 221

<sup>102</sup> *ibid* p 221

<sup>103</sup> *ibid* p 224

make history...for good or for ill". This is so, even to the extent of forming civilizations whose leaders assumed divine prerogatives at the cost and subjugation of other human beings. In this setting,

It is . . . a brilliant ironic move that the primeval history, which grounds its critique of Mesopotamian civilization in the creation of humanity as *imago Dei* in Genesis 1, actually utilizes a transformed (democratized) version of Mesopotamian ideology in order to subvert this very ideology.<sup>104</sup>

Concluding this section of his study, Middleton raises the question of whether a sixth century (exilic) context for the creation account, would have a significant impact on it and its understanding of the *imago Dei*. The evidence for an exilic provenance is, for him, ambiguous, although not impossible. It was at this time "Israel was directly confronted with social embodiment of Mesopotamian ideology in the form of the Neo-Babylonian Empire".<sup>105</sup> For Israel in exile there would have been the constant threat of loss of identity and absorption into the society and worldview of their captors. At the same time questions of great magnitude would have been raised concerning their own beliefs and destiny. The promises of God to Abraham and David in particular, would now seem to be defunct. Their special nature as the people of God enshrined in the Exodus narratives was now open to question, if not to doubt. If Genesis 1 was composed in this context it could be seen as an effort to undermine and subvert the ideology of Babylon and assert the agency and dignity of human beings in the face of a totalising power.

Whenever the notion of humanity in the image of God was first articulated...the author of Genesis 1 daringly seized on the bold symbol of the *imago Dei* to restate for a new context Israel's unique insight about being human...this

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<sup>104</sup> *ibid* pp 227-228

<sup>105</sup> *ibid* p 228

unknown author chose to crystallize the central Israelite insight about being human in terms typically applied only to idols, kings and priests – *selem elohim* – and thereby profoundly affected the worldview and theological imagination of generations of biblical readers.<sup>106</sup>

### **Part 3 The Ethics of the Image**

Middleton has set out the case he wants to make for understanding the image of God in functional terms. He now turns to some of the contemporary implications of this view. These will be dealt with much more briefly, not because his outworking of the practical implications of this view is unimportant, but because it is not so directly pertinent to this study.

In his penultimate chapter he seeks to ask and answer the question, has humanity been created in the image of a violent God? The reason for posing the question in this way is because of the pervasive idea in OT scholarship of the *Chaoskampf* or combat myth in Scripture. The first clear identification of this myth was by Herman Gunkel in 1895. Seeing it in the recently discovered *Enuma Elish* he argued that it could be found in many places in Scripture. The discovery of the *Ras Shamra* literature in 1928 allowed scholars to identify even closer parallels between the OT and Ugaritic myths found in the Canaanite and Syrian writings. These comparisons have led some OT scholars to argue that the OT portrayal of God as creator, mainly outside of Genesis 1 and 2 but not exclusively, involves “...the quasi-mythic notion of God founding the cosmos through an act of primordial violence.” This, for Middleton is problematic as it “...seems to enshrine violence as the quintessential

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<sup>106</sup> *ibid* p 231

divine action”.<sup>107</sup> While willing to admit that creation-by-combat motif is clearly present in the OT, he argues that OT scholarship has misrepresented the nature of that conflict. Rather than seeing the combat myths as representing some cosmogonic conflict – the defeat or annihilation of some watery chaos or monsters and beasts which bring disorder –he sees “the vast majority of biblical texts that utilize the combat myth” as “God’s struggle with and judgement on various political empires, either in the historical past or in the eschatological future.”<sup>108</sup> There are other problems with the combat-by-creation reading of the OT for Middleton. The chief one that he identifies can be summarized, in his terms, as “us/them distinction with only a win/lose alternative.”<sup>109</sup> One of the consequences of this reading, is that it encourages ethnocentricity, which can be equally identified in the ancient and contemporary world.

In the light of this, Middleton proposes a re-reading of those texts that use the combat myth. He suggests that they can legitimately be detached from creation in the Old Testament. The reason for doing this is that many of these texts are not ethnocentric in terms of God fighting on behalf of Israel; indeed, they represent the reverse – God fighting against Israel. Following Bernhard Anderson, he sees the Old Testament as offering an alternative vision “weaned off a pagan view of creation” and in contrast he sees “Israel’s exodus faith, focussing on historical liberation from injustice” as a dominating motif in the OT.<sup>110</sup> His reason is that he sees a number of contemporary trends which use the myth to legitimate domination in a variety of arenas – socio-political, gender relations and in fundamentalist movements, both Christian and non-Christian. Middleton is wary of those who see a creation-by-combat motif in Genesis 1 for two reasons. First, it legitimizes violence.

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<sup>107</sup> *ibid* p 236

<sup>108</sup> *ibid* p 244

<sup>109</sup> *ibid* p 252

<sup>110</sup> *ibid* see pp 253&254

Whether Israel is presented either with the notion of physical resistance to the Mesopotamian ideology and its practical out-workings, or acquiescence to it, both assume its legitimacy. This is an ethical stance that Middleton cannot countenance and understands the Bible to reject. The second reason is that he views the creation account as not being framed as a combat against chaos myth. In Genesis 1 none of the mythic elements or characters are framed as aggressors or opponents to God; there is no sense of struggle, but a peaceful, orderly coming into being by divine *fiat*. A keynote of the account, in complete contrast to the combat myths, is the sense of the goodness of creation. Following John Day and in agreement with Jon Levenson, he asserts that “God is pictured here not as warrior, but as craftsman or artisan.”<sup>111</sup> In its position at the very beginning of the biblical canon, Genesis 1 provides a disclosure of God and his purposes which,

. . . constitute a normative framework by which we may judge all the violence that pervades the rest of the Bible...It also provides a framework for judging human violence in the contemporary world...since such violence stands in direct contradiction to the disclosure of God’s power in Genesis 1.<sup>112</sup>

How the paradigm of divine action is to be seen and worked out in human action is the burden of his final chapter *Imaging God’s Primal Generosity*.

The major issues examined in this chapter are concerned with the nature of this God and the power exercised by him. Once these can be determined, then the implication for human action for ethics can be assessed and described. An understanding of God and his creative activity which produces a number of problematic outcomes is the view that “creation is the

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<sup>111</sup> *ibid* p 266

<sup>112</sup> *ibid* p 269

universal imposition of transcendent will.”<sup>113</sup> This is part of a widespread consensus amongst both theologians and biblical scholars, according to Middleton, which sees this model of creation “as a generalized hierarchical picture of production, causation and dependence”.<sup>114</sup> The problem with this model is that it has been identified with and seen as the cause of the environmental crisis (according to Lynn White Jr.) and with the allied concerns and critique of feminism (for example by Sally McFague). He returns to the biblical text (Genesis 1:1-2:4a) to address these criticisms. The surface symmetry of the creation account, recognised by many exegetes, must be acknowledged. Middleton also observes that there are also many “nonpredictable variations in the text”, for example: patterns being broken, changes between cardinal and ordinal numbers and “no unequivocally clear rationale” for the distribution of the words ‘creating’ and ‘doing’ in the text.<sup>115</sup> He suggests that these variations are analogous to fractals in chaos theory in their complexity and unpredictability. This gives a freedom to the cosmos, it is not “overdetermined” by God, the artisan and maker.<sup>116</sup> God’s rule in the cosmos is then seen in terms of “a strange attractor” (a further term taken from chaos theory), the stabilizing factor in the system. On this basis he clarifies his view of God and the nature of the part exercised in creation by God. He sees God as inviting the non-human in creation to share in the process of creation. So, for example,

On days 3, 5 and 6 (in 1:11-12, 20, 24), God invites the earth (twice) and the waters (once) to participate in creation by bringing forth living creatures... They

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<sup>113</sup> *ibid* p 272

<sup>114</sup> *ibid* p 275

<sup>115</sup> see *ibid* pp 281-4

<sup>116</sup> see *ibid* p 286

are invited, in other words, to exercise their God-given fertility and this to imitate God's own creative actions in filling the earth with living things.<sup>117</sup>

This sharing in the creative activity of God reaches its clearest definition with the creation of humanity in the image of God and its mandate to act as God's authorized agents in the world. This line of thinking is reinforced in the narrative of God resting in Genesis 2. Here the emphasis is on God's rest "from creation, having entrusted care of the earth to human beings."<sup>118</sup> In common with many exegetes, Middleton points out that the seventh day has no concluding formula as the other days, it is open-ended. It is now the era of human history, the story of the delegated rule and stewardship of the human race, for good or ill over the world. An example of this delegation of rule is seen in the naming of the animals. In the creation account God undertakes the naming of Day, Night, Heavens, Land and Seas. Middleton suggests that the withholding from naming the animals and its delegation to humanity is part of God's sharing of his prerogatives with humankind. The outcome for all this for Middleton is a clear picture of the nature of God and the power he exercises. God creates in a way that gives humanity agency, freedom, responsibility and the opportunity for maturation. "Indeed God in Genesis 1 is like no-one as much as a mother, who gives life to her children, blesses them, enhances their power and agency and then takes the parental risk of allowing her progeny to take their first steps, to attempt to use their power, to develop towards maturity."<sup>119</sup> Humanity, as the image of God is called upon to exercise this same power – "a generous loving power"<sup>120</sup> to image God's "gracious self-giving".<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> *ibid* p 288

<sup>118</sup> *ibid* p 291

<sup>119</sup> *ibid* p 295

<sup>120</sup> *ibid*

<sup>121</sup> *ibid* p 297

### ***The Liberating Image* – a preliminary assessment**

Middleton's book covers a great deal of ground and addresses a number of pertinent issues in contemporary biblical and theological scholarship, as well as raising some ethical issues. It is also the most coherent and comprehensive review of the doctrine of the *imago* in recent years. In the light of this, a great deal of space has been devoted to the ideas set out in the book to show the thinking behind the contemporary consensus concerning the functional view of the *imago* and to give Middleton a fair hearing. It will now be argued, however, that these arguments are not as conclusive as Middleton claims and, at the very least, room must be made for the alternative view; the *imago* as relational. The whole of the next chapter will be devoted to an analysis of the notion of the *imago Dei*, partly in response to Middleton and also to develop the idea of this doctrine forming a background or context for divine-human communication. Three main areas of dispute will be touched on in this preliminary assessment and these will also guide the discussion in Chapter 3.

The first area of discussion is that of the author's presuppositions and motivation for writing. Richard Middleton reveals something of his own struggle towards a sense of his self-identity in the face of his personal history that exposed him to a sense of "dislocation and even alienation", as he moved across cultures. He confesses that when he learned of the notion of humanity as the image of God, "this soon became the single most seminal theological concept for my own developing self-image."<sup>122</sup> It is impossible to judge how much his own context influences his approach to this doctrine but it is unsurprising that his history and culture in a post-colonial Jamaica lead him on a trajectory in his book that culminates in the conclusion that sees God "as a generous creator, sharing power with a

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<sup>122</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image* p 10



variety of creatures (especially humanity), inviting them (and trusting them – at some risk) to participate in the creative (and historical) process.”<sup>123</sup> Further he wishes to see a new approach to the text – a hermeneutic of love – this, he says, “would be in harmony with the new ethic of interhuman relationships and ecological practice that we are aiming for and that is rooted into *imago Dei*.”<sup>124</sup> The present purpose is not to question the goals that Middleton is seeking, rather, to question the means by which he arrives at this conclusion. The evidence that he uses and the principles that he draws from it lead almost inevitably from his own life experience to the principles he wishes to enunciate for human life in this world. This causes an element of one-sidedness in his work, especially in a book that is ostensibly designed to “facilitate an interdisciplinary conversation between theologians, ethicists and biblical scholars on the *imago Dei*.”<sup>125</sup> The lack of interaction with theologians such as Stanley Grenz and John Hall, with ethicists such as Paul Ramsey and biblical scholars like Randall Garr and Claus Westermann, to name but a few examples, vitiates the claim to engage in an interdisciplinary conversation.<sup>126</sup> However valuable the theological and socio-ethical goals sought by Middleton they are not the exclusive property of the functional view.<sup>127</sup>

A further question that can be raised about Middleton’s presuppositions is concerned with his view of God. The nature and activity of God, espoused by Middleton, is seen by him to be congruent with the view of those whose model of God has been characterized as “free-will theism” and the “openness of God”. While Middleton was not originally aware of this ‘school’ *per se*, it is still possible to ask the question as to whether or not he was influenced by thinking of a similar nature that is clearly present in his cultural and theological milieu.

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<sup>123</sup> *ibid* pp 296&297

<sup>124</sup> *ibid* p 297

<sup>125</sup> *ibid* p 10

<sup>126</sup> See their respective works in the bibliography

<sup>127</sup> See eg DJ Hall, *Imaging God* (Grand Rapids/New York: Eerdmans/Friendship Press 1986)

Two brief examples of this milieu will suffice for our purpose here. The first is Terence Fretheim's book *The Suffering of God*. In the following passage from this book, the general tenor of Fretheim's thinking has strong similarities with the views expressed by "free-will theists".

The world is not only dependent on God; God is also dependent upon the world; God is affected by the world in both positive and negative ways. God is sovereign over the world, yet not unqualifiedly so, as considerable power and freedom have been given to the creatures. God is the transcendent Lord; but God is transcendent not in isolation from the world, but in relationship to the world. God knows all there is to know about the world, yet there is a future which does not yet exist to be known even by God...God is unchangeable with respect to the steadfastness of his love and salvific will for all creatures, yet God does change in the light of what happens between God and the world.<sup>128</sup>

This view is characterized by Fretheim as the 'organismic view' as opposed to the 'monarchical view', this latter view emphasizing "divine sovereignty, freedom, immutability and control"<sup>129</sup> of God. Fretheim seeks to argue that the 'organismic view' is the predominant one in the Old Testament. This view provoked a very sharp response from Brevard Childs who said, "[M]y initial response is to dismiss this paragraph as an egregious intrusion of modern American process theology! However a more temperate reaction is to point out that this depiction is not the way that Israel throughout all of its history understood God or interpreted the biblical imagery."<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> TE Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1984) p 35

<sup>129</sup> *ibid*

<sup>130</sup> B Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1992) pp 35-37

Another example that can be offered comes from the work of Walter Brueggemann. He suggests “two overriding affirmations” can be made about the creation story:

First the creator has a purpose and a will for creation...The creation has not been turned loose on its own. It has not been abandoned. Nor has it been given free rein for its own inclinations. But the purposes of the creator are not implemented in a coercive way nor imposed as a tyrant might. The creator loves and respects the creation. The freedom of the creation is taken seriously by the creator. Therefore his sovereign rule is expressed in terms of faithfulness, patience and anguish. Second, the creation, which exists only because of and for the sake of the creator’s purpose, has freedom to respond to the creator in various ways...the response ...is a mixture of faithfulness obedience and recalcitrant self-assertion.<sup>131</sup>

Further, in a similar vein to Fretheim, Brueggemann can argue that although “God has been committed to the creation from the beginning,” after the Flood a new element is introduced.

Now the commitment is intensified. For the first time, it is marked by grief, the hurt of betrayal. It is now clear that such a commitment on God’s part is costly. The God-world relationship is not simply that of strong God and needy world. Now it is a tortured relationship between a grieved God and a resistant world. And of the two the real changes are in God.<sup>132</sup>

Once again Brevard Childs provides a different view, as he considers God as creator. He can say writing of Genesis chapter one,

The text does not speak of a God who first was, and then who acted, but of a God who makes known his nature and will in his action. God brought into being ‘the heaven and the earth’, in an act unique to him, as it were out of nothing. He did not

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<sup>131</sup> W Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1982)p 13

<sup>132</sup> *ibid* p 81

merely transform something into something else, but the emphasis falls on the completely new beginning, before which there was no time of earthly being. He brought forth a reality that was distinct from himself, over which he had complete freedom . . . Genesis 1 emphasizes the absolute freedom and power of God over his creation.<sup>133</sup>

At this point, the aim in including these quotations is not to adjudicate between these different approaches but to indicate that this is the context in which Middleton is writing. These two authors, Brueggemann and Fretheim have been chosen, precisely because Middleton acknowledges their influence on his thinking. The contrary quotations from Childs simply indicate that theirs is not the only available reading of the text of Scripture. Childs' view points to the fact that Middleton's handling of the question of divine power, as portrayed in Genesis 1 and 2, is subject to a different reading. While he rightly seeks to avoid any implication of the text legitimizing the use of violence at the human level; it is possible, and necessary, to give more consideration to the unique and absolute power of God as portrayed in the creation accounts. Although it must be recognized that neither exegesis nor theology can be presuppositionless, interaction with other points of view and the recognition of the "alterity of the text"<sup>134</sup> can impact and ameliorate different views.

The second area of discussion raised by Middleton's book is the use of the comparative method to determine the meaning of biblical texts. His contention is that the ancient Near Eastern background that he investigates is not determinative for his conclusion concerning the image of God in Genesis 1. As he begins the second part of his book, he says:

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<sup>133</sup> B Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London SCM Press 1985) p 31

<sup>134</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image* p 297

It is not my intent to claim that knowledge of the historical context of the text is strictly necessary for understanding the meaning of the image. In the field of Old Testament studies, any reconstruction of a text's historical context is largely a matter of hypothesis and plausibility. Reconstructing the historical context of Genesis 1 is particularly difficult, since there is little that could reliably indicate its date or provenance. The meaning of the image, thus, cannot be made to depend on something as tenuous as a particular historical reconstruction. Nevertheless, exploration of the possible historical background and social context of the text may well deepen the understanding of the *imago Dei* that we have arrived at on other grounds.<sup>135</sup>

As Daniel Trier observes, "Despite this disclaimer, Middleton spends pages – whole chapters even – on extratextual background."<sup>136</sup> In fact, he devotes at least twice as much space to his consideration of that background as he does to the text of Genesis in its biblical context. It is this focus on the extrabiblical material that seems to be decisive in his espousal of a functional view of the *imago*.<sup>137</sup> In a similar vein, Nathan MacDonald makes the following comment on this review of Middleton's book:

The problem is that the representational interpretation derives its principal force from an ancient Near Eastern context that lies *outside* the text of Genesis. Similarly, the theological and ethical implications of this view as Middleton expounds them are not articulated in Genesis but are deduced from the juxtaposition of the Biblical text with the near Eastern parallels . . . Old Testament scholarship may argue that the

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<sup>135</sup> *ibid* p 93

<sup>136</sup> DJ Trier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2008) p 122

<sup>137</sup> see Middleton *Liberating Image* pp 43-90 & 93 -180

ancient Near East is the most appropriate context, but this is no longer merely an exegetical argument but also a hermeneutical one!<sup>138</sup>

Although MacDonald does acknowledge “a welcome hermeneutical awareness” on Middleton’s part, he argues that “it is not sufficiently probing into the body of knowledge and norms assumed within Old Testament scholarship.”<sup>139</sup> The prevailing consensus, concerning the interpretation of the *imago Dei*, is therefore open to question in both its methodology and its conclusions.

The use of the comparative method in biblical studies will be considered further in the next chapter. For the purposes of this preliminary critique, it is sufficient to raise the question of whether or not the historical and contextual material employed by Middleton needs to be seen as determinative in this particular instance – the interpretation of the *imago Dei* – or not. The undoubted benefits of comparative study are not being denied and the method has been deployed successfully to clarify many concepts in Old Testament studies – the elucidation of the idea of covenant being one prominent example of its usefulness. The comparative method, analysing the similarities and disparities between the two cultures can operate at a number of levels, for example, the philological, the literary conventions in the cultural milieu and the use of metaphor and imagery. It is open, however, to possible abuse where this method is privileged above all others. The now classic warning against this was issued in 1962 by Samuel Sandmel in his Presidential Address to the Society of Biblical Literature. He coined the term “parallelomania” to describe an approach that, “[F]irst overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and

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<sup>138</sup> quoted in Trier, *Theological Interpretation* p 124

<sup>139</sup> N MacDonald, Review of *The Liberating Image* in Review of Biblical Literature (October 2005): [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4737\\_4887.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4737_4887.pdf) (accessed 13/11/10)

derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction.”<sup>140</sup>

Although Sandmel was particularly concerned with the (mis)use of the comparative method in the New Testament era, the principle he affirms in the following quotation is a salutary one.

Paul’s context is of infinitely more significance than the question of the alleged parallels. Indeed to make Paul’s context conform to the context of the alleged parallels is to distort Paul. The knowledge on our part of the parallels may assist us in understanding Paul’s but if we make him mean only what the parallels mean, we are using the parallels in a way that can lead us to misunderstand Paul.<sup>141</sup>

It might be an overly harsh judgment to accuse Middleton of “parallelomania”, but the tendency to privilege the parallel, extrabiblical material is clearly evident in his book.

The final area for discussion that needs to be raised in this preliminary critique is concerned with exegesis. Middleton is prepared to exhibit what may be called ‘exegetical and hermeneutical humility’, in the sense that he does not purport to offer the *right* reading of the text. He wishes to affirm that God is portrayed as King in Genesis 1 but has to admit,

. . . that God is never actually called “king” (*melek*) or any clearly identifiable synonym for king (such as shepherd) in the text, nor is God the subject of any explicit verbs of ruling . . . Indeed the royal metaphor in Genesis 1, if it is there at all, is certainly not overpowering. It is, on the contrary, somewhat implicit and adumbrated.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> JBL 81 1962 p 1

<sup>141</sup> *ibid* p 5

<sup>142</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image*, p 71

Elsewhere, when considering “the dynamic power or agency that God grants humans at creation,” he also says, “Although it is not explicitly stated in Genesis 1, it is reasonable to think that this power is to be exercised responsibly.”<sup>143</sup> The danger here is that too much weight may be given to implicit readings or “reading between the lines” and, therefore, miss the intention of the original author(s) and the perception of the original hearers/readers. Writing in another context, Oliver O’Donovan wryly remarked that there is a temptation to make secondary matters primary ones – to uncover the ‘real’ meaning of a text. Understanding this tendency the authors of a jointly produced document “hoped to avert it by warning readers not to ‘read between the lines’. That, however, is where current fashions of ‘unmasking’ have taught a whole generation to begin and end their reading!”<sup>144</sup> Whatever the value of Middleton’s ideological motivations in producing his implicit meaning, the question of what the text says explicitly is still open and needs to be examined. A final comment may be made that is linked to Middleton’s exegesis of Genesis 1; it is concerned with his approach to intertextuality. He issues some pertinent cautions concerning the overuse of intertextual readings, including the dangers of “flights of hermeneutical fantasy” and makes “a comparatively restrained use of other Old Testament texts at appropriate junctures.”<sup>145</sup> These texts have “some sort of plausible conceptual relationship to Genesis 1,”<sup>146</sup> and principally that relationship is one that reinforces the understanding of the ‘royal-functional’ image that Middleton proposes. A wider perspective can be gained by an examination of other texts, as will be shown in the next chapter. Although Middleton forgoes any consideration of New Testament texts, a Christian canonical reading surely demands that any relevant NT data is analysed as well. As with Middleton, space forbids

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<sup>143</sup> *ibid* p 204

<sup>144</sup> O O’Donovan, *A Conversation Waiting to Begin* (London: SCM Press 2009) p 16, n 17

<sup>145</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image*, p 65

<sup>146</sup> *ibid* p 64



that every avenue can be fully explored in this study, but some significant areas for discussion can be raised that are relevant to the understanding of the *imago* in the context of the biblical canon and beyond and these are the focus of the next chapter.

## Chapter 3

### A Context for Communication (ii)

There is an inherent problem with any “consensus view”, that is it can become the unquestioned orthodoxy of the day and cease to be open to scrutiny. Paul Niskanen is of the opinion that this is now the case with the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. He suggests that, “[E]ven among very recent works (such as J Richard Middleton’s *The Liberating Image*) that seek to steer the discussion in new directions, the “virtual consensus” of the functional interpretation of the image as ruling or dominion is still strongly affirmed and taken as a starting point.”<sup>1</sup>

Niskanen himself has at least one substantial objection to the way the crucial text of Genesis 1:26-28 is understood and he proposes that a re-reading of it is required. There are a number of points where Middleton’s conclusions are not as firmly established as he suggests. These exegetical issues will be considered first.

#### Genesis 1:26-28 revisited

One of the first issues presented by this text is the meaning of “Let us make humankind in our own image”. The range of possible meanings that are normally canvassed to explain the use of the plural in this statement can be outlined as follows:

1. A residual polytheism – this, however, is extremely unlikely if the attribution of this text to the Priestly writer is correct. Much recent scholarship points to the anti-mythological thrust of the text.

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<sup>1</sup> P Niskanen, ‘The Poetics of Adam’, *JBL* 128 no.3(2009) p 419

2. The plural has been considered as a plural of “majesty”, but the paucity of OT parallels makes this a very tenuous view.
3. Grammatically the construction is seen as a plural of (self-)deliberation and although biblical parallels of this are rare, they do exist (eg Gen 1: 7&9; Is 6:8).
4. From the Church Fathers onwards, the use of the plural has been seen as an indication of the Trinity. This however has great difficulties, not least of all in explaining how it could imply this for the original writer and readers.
5. A moderating view (championed by David Clines) is that it is an indication of plurality in the Godhead. With reference to Gen 1:2, Clines sees this as an address to the Spirit of God. The evidence of this is limited and depends on translating *ruach* in 1:2 as ‘spirit’ rather than ‘wind’.<sup>2</sup>
6. The plural is seen as an address to the heavenly assembly – the angels (‘sons of God’) – and this idea has a number of possible parallels in the OT (see Job 1 & 2; 1 Kings 22; Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 23:18). The notion of a heavenly assembly or court was common in ANE, “[Y]et one need not look to the culture contemporary to the Old Testament since evidence abounds within the Old Testament itself. Psalm 82:1 is a case in point: ‘God presides in the divine assembly. He gives judgement in the midst of the gods’.”<sup>3</sup>

The two main options supported by many OT scholars are, that it is an instance of self-deliberation (Westermann) and that it is an address to the heavenly assembly (Wenham). Neither of these views necessarily excludes the other, but as Wenham points out, “. . . in fact the use of the singular verb ‘create’ in 1:27 does suggest that God worked alone in the

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<sup>2</sup> See D Clines, ‘The Image of God in Man’ *TB* 19 (1968) pp 68-69

<sup>3</sup> P Gentry, ‘Kingdom through Covenant: Humanity in Divine Image’, *SBJT* p 34 the other references to the OT are taken from this paper.

creation of mankind. The expression ‘Let us make humankind’ should “therefore be regarded as a divine announcement to the heavenly court drawing the angelic hosts attention to the master stroke of creation” – humanity.<sup>4</sup>

“Let us make humankind”, however, is more than an announcement, it represents a significant shift in the flow of the creation narrative. Up to this point there has been “a consistent use of the verb in the jussive”, but here it is cohortative, which “is enough to prepare the reader for something momentous on the sixth day.”<sup>5</sup> The intended outcome of this particular act of creation is not simply that humanity should come into existence, but rather that humanity *as the image of God* should come into being. W Randall Garr states this in the following way:

Not only does the clause-initial position of the verb suggest the cohortative reading, but a comparison with the jussives that engaged other acts of creation reinforce its desiderative sense. The speech therefore begins like that of Gen1:7, 11:3.4 and Ex 1:10, with a desiderative proposition . . . The first word of God’s speech, **נַעֲשֶׂה**, is a highly transitive, dynamic and agentive verb. As a cohortative, then it “(ii) proposes an activity (event),” . . . God’s desiderative proposal in v26 effects its execution.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, this speech-act of God ushers in a new element to the creation narrative, an element that distinguishes humanity from the rest of the created order.

Humanity is to be created, according to God’s speech, “in our image and according to our likeness.” Both the prepositions and the nouns in this clause have provoked a great deal of interpretive discussion. Middleton has a brief paragraph concerning the prepositions in which he considers the debate about them to be “inconclusive”, whereas Garr devotes a

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<sup>4</sup> G Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word Books 1987) p 28

<sup>5</sup> V Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990) p 134

<sup>6</sup> WR Garr, *In His Own image and Likeness* (Leiden: Brill 2003) pp 85-86; quoting MZ Brettler, *God is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor*, p117

complete chapter to their interpretation seeking to establish the particular nuance of what are often assumed to be synonyms. He suggests that although in Gen1:26

. . . two different prepositional phrases appear in immediate succession. Neither phrase is semantically or grammatically required. They each contain a similitive nominal yet are governed by a grammatically distinct preposition head. They each present information rhetorically peripheral to the sentential core. Hence, the differential marking of each nonobligatory phrase suggests that each phrase has distinct meaning, at least in relation to one another.<sup>7</sup>

After a detailed examination of the use of the two prepositions (כִּי and כִּדְמוּת) in Gen 1:26 and in the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, including many alleged counter-examples, Garr sums up their respective nuances in the following way: “[T]he two prepositions, then, each effectively serve a deictic function: כִּי marks a proximate and כִּדְמוּת a distal, qualification of a shared antecedent.”<sup>8</sup>

There have been many attempts made to clarify the meaning of the two nouns used in the phrase “in our image and according to our likeness”. In 1991, Gerald Bray suggested that, “[T]he semantic range of the main terms, *tselem* and *d’muth*, is now broadly agreed. The former refers primarily to a concrete image, a definite shape; the latter is more abstract – a resemblance, or a likeness.”<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the validity of this judgement, this consensus does not reveal much about the actual content of the image and there certainly is some fluidity in even the categories suggested by Bray. A simple survey of OT references that include those nouns shows

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid* p 95

<sup>8</sup> *ibid* p 113

<sup>9</sup> G Bray, *The Significance of God's Image in Man*. TB 42.2 (1991) p196

something of that fluidity. The brief survey given by Peter Gentry helpfully makes the point. With reference to the model of the altar that King Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest (2 Kings 16:10), Gentry speaks of “a physical entity”, whereas in Isaiah 40:18 the same word (likeness/דְמוּת) is used of a “preferentially unspecific resemblance or relative similarity”, in a “nonreferential” way. Furthermore Gentry argues that; “Ezekiel 1:26 is instructive since it is opposite to Gen 1:26, which speaks of humanity created in the likeness of God; Ezekiel’s vision speaks of God appearing in the likeness of humanity. As Garr notes, either way, “God and humanity are morphologically similar.”<sup>10</sup>

In the same way, there is a broad semantic range to the noun image (צֶלֶם) in Hebrew. Gentry points to three main usages in the Old Testament, the first being an object in the real world that can have size, shape, colour, material composition and value, “as in Nebuchadnezzar’s statue in Daniel 3:1.” Secondly, it can be used in an abstract and non-concrete way (see Ps 39:6&7); and finally “can simply be an imprint etched on a wall” as in Ezek 23:14b & 15. Gentry, like Middleton, enlists comparative study to help elucidate possible meanings for these two nouns. A tenth- (or possibly ninth-) century inscription from Gozan, written in Akkadian and Aramaic, focuses on the role of the king portrayed by the statue to which it is attached. The text is in two parts, the theme of the first part is concerned with the relationship of the king vis-à-vis his god and is headed by the Aramaic equivalent of the word “likeness”. The second part is concerned with the “majesty and power of the king, each has a different nuance.”<sup>11</sup> Randall Garr explains these two words, thus,

<sup>10</sup> P Gentry, ‘Kingdom through Covenant’ p 27

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* p 28 Gentry gives three other Akkadian examples that support the conclusion drawn from the Tell Fakhariyeh inscription referred to above.

‘Likeness’ is petitionary and directed at the deity; it is cultic and votive. ‘Image’ is majestic and absolute and commemorative; it is directed at the people. Thus, those two Aramaic terms encode two traditional roles of the Mesopotamian ruler – that of devoted worshipper and that of sovereign monarch.<sup>12</sup>

Having quoted this judgment of Garr, Mark Smith goes on to say,

We may read terms in Genesis 1:26-28 in a similar manner. As the image and likeness of the god, the human person is to be the devoted worshipper of the god who also serves God the sovereign as servant and agent on earth. The second notion leads to the verbs in verse 28: the human person is to master and rule the earth.<sup>13</sup>

An interpretation of this nature, that sees the two nouns as expressing this kind of nuance, rather than being virtually synonymous, has often been questioned (or ignored) in Old Testament studies. The synonymity of the terms has been maintained on the basis of a comparison with Gen 5:1-3. In particular 5:3 reverses the order of the terms and their prepositions are also exchanged. This, to many commentators, suggests the interchangeability of the prepositions,<sup>14</sup> and, to others, that the phrases themselves are interchangeable. While admitting that each noun has “its own proper meaning”, Westermann can go on to say that “. . . nevertheless the fact that they are interchangeable (both nouns are used, now the one and now the other) shows clearly that we have here one expression which further determines the creation of humans”.<sup>15</sup>

Although future studies will have to take account of Randall Garr’s comprehensive work, there have been in the past voices dissenting from the consensus. In 1968 two lectures were

<sup>12</sup> WR Garr, ‘Image’ and ‘Likeness’ in the inscription from Tell Fakhariyeh’ *IEJ* 50 pp 231-232, quoted in MS Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis Fortress 2010) p 100

<sup>13</sup> MS Smith, *The Priestly Vision*, p 100

<sup>14</sup> G Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p 127

<sup>15</sup> C Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis Fortress 1994) pp 145-146. See also G von Rad, *Genesis* (London SCM Press 1972) p 58

published that offered a different approach to the comparison often made between Genesis 1:26 and 5:3.

James Barr in a programmatic lecture raised the question of the writer's use of two words rather than one and proceeded to answer it by suggesting that "though *selem* is the more important word, it is also the more ambiguous." There is, therefore, a purpose in adding the second word, namely:

*d'muth* is added to define and limit its meaning, by indicating that the sense intended for *selem* must lie within that part of its range which overlaps with the range of *d'muth*. This purpose having been accomplished when both words are used together at the first mention, it now becomes possible to use one of the two above subsequently without risk of confusion. In later exegesis, the loss of sense of this literary device caused interpreters to suppose that the "image" might be one thing and the "likeness" some quite other thing.<sup>16</sup>

On this basis, he argues that the use of only one word in Gen 5:1 (*d'muth*) and the reversal of the order of the two words in Gen 5:3 may be attributed to the writer's "stylistic characteristics . . . his habit of alternating a major and a minor word which have roughly the same function in his scheme."<sup>17</sup> An alternative way of resolving this issue was also offered by David Clines. He argued that a more nuanced approach was needed for both the nouns and their accompanying prepositions. He suggested that a variation between the prepositions in particular could be exegetically established. His argument is based on a conclusion that is fully developed later in his paper, that the divine image belongs to humankind as such. That is, it is not something unique to the race in the prelapsarian narrative but continues beyond

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<sup>16</sup> J Barr, 'The Image of God in the Book of Genesis – A Study in Terminology', *BJRL* vol 51 no1 (Autumn 1968) p24

<sup>17</sup> *ibid* p 25



it, even into the New Testament. Clines cites as appropriate evidence, Gen 9, Psalm 8 (where the image is alluded to), 1 Cor 11:7 and James 3:9.<sup>18</sup> In the light of this he argues that,

Gen 5:1,3 does not speak of the transmission of the divine image . . . but of Seth's likeness to Adam; hence the aspect of the image doctrine that is of interest to the writer at this point is that Adam was made 'in the likeness' which is the same thing as 'according to the likeness') of God. Thus verse 1 has **בדמות** and not **בצלם**. Seth is not Adam's image, but only like Adam's shape, so verse 3 has not **בצלמו** but **כצלמו**. Thus Gen 1:26 is not to be interpreted by 5:1,3 but *vice versa*.<sup>19</sup>

These exegetical suggestions by Barr and Clines receive little or no attention in major commentaries on Genesis and have not proved, therefore, to be totally persuasive.<sup>20</sup>

Following the exegetical and comparative conclusions of Garr and from his own research, Peter Gentry is prepared to state the following thesis:

Given the normal meanings of "image" and "likeness" in the cultural and linguistic setting of Old Testament and the ancient Near East, "likeness" specifies a relationship between God and humans such that *'adām* can be described as the son of God, and "image" describes a relationship between God and human beings, such that *'adām* can be described as a servant king. Although both terms specify the divine-human relationship, the first focuses on the human in relation to God and the second focuses on the human in relation to the world.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See D Clines, 'The Image of God' pp 99 & 100

<sup>19</sup> *ibid* p 78 n 117

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the commentaries of Hamilton, Wenham and Westermann quoted above.

<sup>21</sup> P Gentry, 'Kingdom through Covenant' pp 28 & 29

The idea that a king could be designated as “a son of god” is relatively common in ancient Near Eastern cultures and it is also found in the Hebrew scripture. The Psalms contain the clearest indications that the King is seen as God’s son; Psalms 2, 89 & 110 make this explicit.<sup>22</sup>

There is also evidence of it in the narrative that deals with David and Solomon, especially concerning the building of the temple and the future of the nation – see for example 2 Samuel 7:14, 1 Chron 17:13, 22:10 and 28:6. Caution, however, is needed here, as there is a clear possibility of reading kingship language into Genesis 1:26-28. This problem is clearly stated by Phyllis Bird who says concerning the image of God:

The interpretation of the expression as a royal motif is not simply dependent, however, on the context of its use in Gen 1:26. Though the term *selem*, by itself, lacks specific content, the phrase *selem ’elohim* appears to derive its meaning from a special association with the royal ideology of the ancient Near East. It is true that the Old Testament uses of *selem* do not point to such a thesis, nor does the Old Testament ideology or lexicon of kingship. If a royal image lies behind the use of *selem* in Gen 1:26-27, it must rest on an idea or expression of kingship found outside preserved Israelite sources.<sup>23</sup>

A similar judgment is made by Nathan MacDonald who maintains that “. . . even an examination of the consequences of the image in v28 does not unambiguously support the

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<sup>22</sup> See further on this, WH Schmidt, *The Faith of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Blackwell 1983) pp 188-194 and JH Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Nottingham Apollos 2007) p 278-286. See also W Beyerlin, *Near Eastern Religious Texts relating to the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press 1978) pp 9,27 (Egyptian texts), pp 107,113 (Mesopotamian), p 223 (Ugaritic)

<sup>23</sup> P Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1997) p 134

typical regal interpretation.”<sup>24</sup> Leaving aside for the moment, whether Gentry and others are correct in seeing Gen1:26-28 as open to a royal interpretation, it is an uncertain foundation on which to build a wholly “royal-functional interpretation of the image”. This is, however, what Middleton does, even though he has to greatly modify certain aspects of God as King/Ruler to make the point he wishes to make concerning humanity as the image of God exercising dominion in the world as an act of generosity and creativity.<sup>25</sup>

Many modern English translations of Genesis 1 recognise the poetic structure to verse 27 and set the verse out accordingly:

So God created humankind in his image,	27a
in the image of God he created them,	27b
male and female he created them.	27c

A major exegetical issue here is whether or not the third line of this verse should be seen as distinct from the first two lines or whether it is explanatory or amplificatory in some way. A basically negative assessment is given by Phyllis Bird, who sees the final line not so much linked with the thought of the first lines, but as preparatory for the thought of the next verse (28). So, she says,

... the primary word about the nature of *'adām*, and the sole word of *Wortbericht* is that this one is like God, created in resemblance to God as image or representation. The audacious statement of identification and correspondence, however qualified by terms of approximation, offers no ground for assuming sexual distinction, as a characteristic of *'adām*, but appears rather to exclude it, for God (*'elohim*) is the defining term in the statement.

<sup>24</sup> N MacDonald, 'The *imago Dei* and Election' *IJST* vol 10 no 3 July 2008 p 326

<sup>25</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image*, see pp 235 & 297

After arguing that any attribution of sexuality would be repugnant to the author/editor of the P material, she continues,

Consequently, the word that identifies 'adām by reference to divine likeness must be supplemented or qualified before the blessing of fertility can be pronounced; for the word of blessing assumes, does not bestow, the means of reproduction.

The required word of qualification and specification is introduced in v27b [v27c above]. *Unlike* God but *like* the other creatures, 'adām is characterised by sexual differentiation. . . The two parallel cola contain two essential and distinct statements about the nature of humanity: 'adām is created like (ie resembling) God, but as creature, and hence male and female. The parallelism of the two cola is progressive, not synonymous.<sup>26</sup>

In a contrary view, maintaining a close connection between the cola of the poem, Phyllis Tribble suggests that the nature of humanity as male and female offers clues to the nature of God. For her to “describe male and female . . . is to perceive the image of God; to perceive the image of God is to glimpse the transcendence of God.”<sup>27</sup> Karl Barth also reads the third line as a direct explanation of the first two. Creation in the divine image, for him, is “existence in confrontation . . . in the juxtaposition and conjunction of man and man which is that of male and female.”<sup>28</sup>

Richard Middleton, while recognising some value in the work of both Tribble and Barth, is very much in agreement with Bird in her analysis of the third line of the poem. The problem with Tribble and Barth's view of verse 27 is that “. . . they depend on taking the third line of

<sup>26</sup> P Bird, *Missing Persons*, pp 142-144

<sup>27</sup> P Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1978) p21, see the whole section as this verse, pp 15-21

<sup>28</sup> K Barth, *CD* vol III, part 1 p 195

1:27 as a case of roughly synonymous parallelism with the first two lines (or at least with the second line)”.<sup>29</sup> He offers a second reason why 1:27 cannot be interpreted in a relational way and that is because the terms used for male and female are “. . . biological, not social, terms and this cannot support either the notion of human relationality or culturally male/female characteristics.”<sup>30</sup> These views, of Tribble and Barth, therefore, are considered to be “misguided”. The evidence that Middleton adduces for his comment on poetic parallelism relies solely on the work of Robert Alter. There is a problem with this, as Paul Niskanen points out: “Middleton fails to take into consideration, however, the marked structural differences between Gen1:27 and the examples used by Alter.”<sup>31</sup> Niskanen proceeds first to investigate the parallelism of this verse posing the problem in this way:

At the centre of much controversy over the meaning of the *imago Dei* is the third line of v.27 – whether it is primary or an addition to the text, and whether it explicates the preceding line(s) by way of synonymous parallelism or represents a progressive parallelism, not explicating but adding to the first line(s).<sup>32</sup>

In dealing Gen 1:27, Niskanen wishes to concentrate on the actual poetic usage rather than some assumed ‘rules’ of Hebrew poetry. He cites Middleton’s statement that, “Robert Alter claims that by his count synonymous restatement characterises less than one quarter of all poetic doublets in the Bible.”<sup>33</sup> But then counters this by saying, “Never mind that Alter also points out the rather common occurrence of versets shaped on a principal of static synonymy.”<sup>34</sup> A similar synonymy can be seen in the first two lines of Gen1:27, “The

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<sup>29</sup> R Middleton, *Liberating image* p 49

<sup>30</sup> *ibid* p 50

<sup>31</sup> P Niskanen, ‘The Poetics of Adam’, p 420 n 17

<sup>32</sup> *ibid* p 421

<sup>33</sup> *ibid* p 421 quoting Middleton, *Liberating Image* p 49

<sup>34</sup> *ibid* p 421 quoting R Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, p 22

real problem comes into play with the third line.”<sup>35</sup> Here Alter’s rule does not pertain, as his examples of three-line poems do not contain “. . . a repetition of elements from the first two lines in the third”.<sup>36</sup> A more pertinent example is to be found in three lines of Psalm 1. The first verse of the Psalm is an example of a tricolon “in which cola a and b are arranged chiastically and b and c synonymously.”<sup>37</sup> Niskanen comments, “This is precisely the pattern of chiasm and synonymous parallelism encountered in Gen:1v27”<sup>38</sup> This leads to the following conclusion:

In each instance one witnesses a parallelism that is both synonymous and progressive. The third colon is not simply restating the first, but neither is it introducing an entirely new subject as Bird and Middleton suggest. As Willis states: “Tricola gave to the psalmist an opportunity to build a thought or emotion to a climax. By using a tricola, he could keep his hearers or readers in suspense, and thus gain or hold their attention and have them thinking with him as he attempted to drive home the concept that he desired to convey.” Thus the statement, “male and female he created them” far from being dissociated from the concept of the image of God stands at the very crux of its interpretation.”<sup>39</sup>

There are three further elements to Niskanen’s analysis of Gen1:27 that are significant in understanding the meaning of the *imago*. The first is concerned with the fluidity of the number of “humankind” in the text. “The Hebrew word אָדָם is found only in the singular and is predominantly used as a collective. . . . But we should not overlook the fact that אָדָם

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid* p 422

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid* p 423, quoting JT Willis VT 29 (1979) pp 475 - 476

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*. And in n 27, ten other examples of this form of tricola in the Psalms are also quoted from Willis.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid* p 424

is used also of individuals.”<sup>40</sup> While some may be tempted to dismiss the noun’s use in Genesis 2 on the grounds that it is often considered to be a second creation account – “One need not, however, venture beyond the first chapter or the central verse of this study to see the potential significance of the double meaning of אָדָם – the collective and the singular.”<sup>41</sup> The subtlety of this use is not seen in English translations, he suggests, because of a prior decision made concerning the meaning or because of the wish “. . . to avoid the awkward necessity of using either a masculine or feminine pronoun in the singular since the grammatically singular masculine noun is semantically inclusive of both male and female.”<sup>42</sup> In the light of the criticisms made of the relational interpretation of the *imago*, Niskanen offers a moderating view:

While it may be true that the rise of the modern social sciences led Karl Barth and others to see in this passage something of the essentially relational nature of human existence, it does not seem fair simply to dismiss this insight as eisegesis or the undue influence of dogmatic (or constructive) theology on biblical (or historical) theology. After all, the fundamental question of the one and the many and a basic awareness of the personal and communal aspects of human being are nothing new under the sun. One need not make of the Priestly writer either a polytheist or a Trinitarian in order to allow him to have some basic insight into human nature.<sup>43</sup>

The second of the other elements highlighted by Niskanen’s analysis concerns the use of “male” and “female” in Gen 1:27. Although many commentators suggest these terms are

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid* p 426

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*

<sup>43</sup> *ibid* pp 427-428

used so as not “to distinguish humans from other creatures,”<sup>44</sup> the evidence does not bear this out. The Priestly writer makes the distinction between male and female in the Flood narrative (see Gen 6:19 and 7:9), but this is precisely what he does not do in the creation story. At the point where it would be most expected – the blessing of the animals with fertility (1:22) – no mention of male and female is made. The inclusion of the clause “male and female he created them”, “. . . is unique to the creation of humans in God’s image and is functioning positively in defining humankind in God’s image.”<sup>45</sup> The argument that the terms are biological and not social is also seen as “missing the mark”. He questions whether the alternative terms man (זָכָר) and woman (נִקְבָּה) are any more social and whether they would act in a limiting way linking the image more particularly with husband and wife. Indeed, he suggests that it is intentional on the writer’s part to use these words to emphasise the biological aspect of humanity, especially as they are included in a clause that is juxtaposed to the blessing of fertility. So he asks,

But why dissociate it from the idea of the image of God on this count? Is this not also God’s image? Has God not been bringing forth life throughout Genesis 1? It would seem that the will and the power to create/procreate are a significant parallel that the author draws between God and humans. In the event that one misses the connection here, it is repeated in Gen 5:1-2.<sup>46</sup>

To the objection that the same blessing of fertility is extended to fish and animal life, it can be replied that it is only to humanity that this blessing is communicated through a direct address.<sup>47</sup> The third additional element from Niskanen’s analysis focuses on the use of the definite article in Gen 1:27. In Hebrew poetry it is not unusual for the article to be omitted,

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid* p 431 quoting Bird “*Male and Female*” p 143 n 50

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

<sup>46</sup> *ibid*

<sup>47</sup> *ibid* see n 64



when it would still be present in prose. “Yet in the broader context of Gen1:26-27, one finds the anarthrous אדם in the more prosaic v26 and האדם in the poetry of v27”<sup>48</sup> The syntax of these two verses may offer an explanation for this use; “In v26 אלהים proposed to create אדם, and in v27 the creation of this aforementioned אדם (האדם) is carried out.”<sup>49</sup> According to Niskanen, this does not need to be seen simply as a syntactical relationship.

The syntax corresponds to a relationship in reality between the idea of אדם conceived in the mind of אלהים and the actualisation of this idea in the creation of האדם. To borrow a word from Duns Scotus, the *haeceitas* (or “thisness”) of אדם is expressed by the use of the definite article...We might thus translate: “So God created this ’*adām* in his image.” The article identifies the אדם with the previously mentioned proposal of God, and it also points to the concrete expression of the divine deliberation. Put another way, one cannot say האדם until there is a specific, concrete אדם in the world to which one can point.<sup>50</sup>

The idea of concreteness is one that fits well with the general understanding of אדם in both Old Testament and the ancient Near East. As Niskanen concludes: “This specificity (the “thisness”) of God’s masterpiece of creation applies to אדם understood as a singular and as a collective.”<sup>51</sup>

As with Gen 1:27, so with 1:28, Middleton does not break any new ground but repeats some of the majority opinion. Yet, as has been shown above, there have been a number of new

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid* p 434

<sup>49</sup> *ibid*

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*. He is following Waltke & O'Connor *IHBS* here. See pp 242-3 on the use of the anaphoric article as weakly demonstrative.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid* p 436

avenues of analysis, which leave the consensus open to question. In Genesis 1:28, a feature that is often overlooked is that it consists mainly of direct speech.

God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

There are, for Middleton, three main issues that need to be addressed concerning Gen 1:26 - 28. These are: the use of the first person plural in 1:26; the “dominion” committed to human beings; and humanity as male and female. What is not examined by Middleton is the address of God to the human being through which they are given that dominion.<sup>52</sup> This is, however, an important element of the text, which must not be overlooked. It is not only important for the text itself but for the way that the Old Testament views the divine-human relationship. John Goldingay sums it up as follows:

Whatever the connotation of “image of God” the content of the description introduces an understanding that runs through the First Testament. On the one hand, the creator is absolute lord, the God of heaven and earth, independent of the world and not susceptible to human manipulation. On the other, the creator is one who addresses and relates to humanity “as a Thou”. . . God first relates to humanity as a “thou” in transmitting the power to procreate and fill the earth, though God did that to the animals (Gen1:22). Toward humanity in particular God goes on to speak to bestow authority, give gifts, explain something of the place of other living things in creation, prescribe limits and offer warnings (Gen1:28-30; 2:16-17).<sup>53</sup>

The minor caveat raised by Goldingay, that God gave a similar blessing to the animals (1:22), does not weaken the point about the distinctiveness of God’s relationship with

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<sup>52</sup> See Middleton, *Liberating Image* p 48 for these three issues

<sup>53</sup> J Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology* vol 2 (Downers Grove: IVP 2006) pp 520 -1

humankind though speech. Although Gen1:22 & 1:28 have an almost identical form, there is a difference.

God blessed them saying, “Be fruitful and multiply. . .” (1:22)

God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply. . .”(1:28)

The introductory framework of these verses has a significant variation as far as the representation of speech in biblical Hebrew narrative is concerned.<sup>54</sup> Cynthia Miller has shown that when speech is framed by **לֵאמֹר** (“saying” in 1:22 above) it is “used in non-dialogic ways that multiple verb frames are not.”<sup>55</sup> Whereas “multiple-verb frames more frequently represent a prototypical dialogic situation. In addition, multiple-verb frames often are used to indicate the most salient utterance within a conversation.”<sup>56</sup> Approaching these two verses (1:22 & 28) from a slightly different perspective, William Brown, in his discussion of the Hebrew and Greek texts of Gen 1:1-2:3, claims that the openings of these verses “connote two different things.” And he goes on to explain the difference thus,

The former is a generic, object-less opening of a divine declaration; the latter is a personal, divine address. Of note is the fact that the MT cites *'elohim* a second time, stressing direct divine address to human beings. The difference in formulations points to the difference in creations: the sea and aerial creatures, on the one hand, and human beings on the other. Thus it is equally plausible that the different introductions of divine speech is attributable to a change in the MT to highlight the ontological separation between animal life and human beings.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Taken from the title of C Miller, *The Representation of Speech in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*

<sup>55</sup> Cynthia Miller (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns 2003) p 357. Her complete evidence for this is set out in pp 356-362

<sup>56</sup> *ibid* p 354 See p 416f where she answers possible objections to her view

<sup>57</sup> WP Brown, *Structure, Role and Ideology in the Hebrew and Greek Texts of Genesis 1:1-2:3*(Atlanta: Scholars Press 1993) p141 n35

It is, of course, the man and the woman together who share in this ontological separation; they are the ones who are addressed (“God said to *them*”). As Garr observes, “A minimal biological pair is also necessary to realize the content of his [God’s] speech.”<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere he says, with reference to Gen1:28, “God’s addressees are human, speech-producing and finite in number . . . Each participant is fully capable of engaging in interactive speech, as the introductory frame conveys. The frame suggests that human beings, unlike animals, can be God’s (conversational) partner in the world.”<sup>59</sup>

Walter Brueggemann concurs with this judgment and is prepared to speak of humankind as “. . . the speech-creature *par excellence*. . . the one to whom God has made a peculiarly intense commitment (by speaking) and to whom marvelous freedom has been granted (in responding).”<sup>60</sup> Such an understanding does not justify every aspect of Karl Barth’s view of the *imago*, but it does underline an important element of it when he says that, “The special feature of human existence in virtue of which man is capable of action in relation to God; his nature as a thou which can be addressed by God and an I which is responsible to Him.”<sup>61</sup>

Before concluding this brief summary of some of the important exegetical points that need to be considered in developing an understanding of the *imago*, a comment on the sense of purpose that permeates these three verses of Genesis is apposite. In Gen1:26, whether or not the “Let us make” is deliberative, there is a sense of deliberateness, of intention, in the speech-acts of God. Christopher Wright explains it in the following way:

Exegetically when two ‘jussive’ clauses (clauses like ‘Let something happen’ or  
 ‘Let us do something’) follow one another with a simple conjunction, the overall

<sup>58</sup> R Garr, *In His Own Image* p 130

<sup>59</sup> *ibid* p 224

<sup>60</sup> W Brueggemann *Genesis* (Atlanta John Knox Press 1982) p 31 See also C Westermann *Genesis 1-11* pp 150-151

<sup>61</sup> K Barth *CD* Vol III part 1 p 199

sense can be to make the second the intended result of the first, or what the first enables to happen. . . Similarly the thrust of God's two statements could be taken as 'Let us make human beings in our own image and likeness, *so that they* may exercise dominion over the rest of creation'. The two are not identical, but the first intentionally enables the second.<sup>62</sup>

This is a judgment endorsed by Hebrew grammarians and is also suggested by Randall Garr in his comprehensive exegetical study.<sup>63</sup> This element of intentionality is also present in Gen 1:27, as has been shown by Niskanen. The very creation of humanity as personal and communal, as both male and female, enables them to fulfil the mandate given by God – to fill the earth (by procreation) and to have dominion over it (by personal and corporate activity). It is worth noting briefly here that dominion does not mean exploitation as is often alleged; "On the contrary, the biblical foundation of that doctrine would tend in the opposite direction, away from a licence to exploit and towards a duty of respect and to protect."<sup>64</sup> Finally God's intention is reiterated in the form of a blessing and as instruction in 1:28. Again, Wright helpfully sums this up as follows:

God did not *give* to human beings the image of God. Rather, it is a dimension of our creation. The expression 'in our own image' is adverbial (it describes the way God made us), not adjectival (as if it simply described a quality we possess). The image of God is not so much something we *possess*, as *what we are*. . . If having dominion over the rest of creation is not what the image of God *is*, it is certainly what being

<sup>62</sup> CJH Wright *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester: IVP 2004) p 119 n 21. A similar point is made by Middleton, *Liberating Image* p 53

<sup>63</sup> As noted by Gentry, 'Kingdom through Covenant' p 40n 34 – referring to: Paul Jouon, *Grammaire de l'Hébreu Biblique* (Rome, biblical Institute 1923), § 116; Thomas O Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1971) §107

see also, Waltke and O'Connor for the use of waw to connect volitional forms *IBHS* §39.2.5b, p653; and R.Garr, *In His Own Image* p 85

<sup>64</sup> J Barr, 'Men and Nature' *BJRL* p 30

the image of God *enables*. Among the many implications of being made in God's image, this is the one that Genesis puts in the foreground: having been made by God in God's own image, human beings are instructed and equipped to exercise dominion. Or, to put it the other way round, because God *intended* this last-created species, the human species, for that express reason God purposefully created this species alone in his own image.<sup>65</sup>

Even if it still remains impossible to define the nature of the image of God in humankind in specific terms – whether in physical, spiritual, noetic or any other category – the survey of exegetical possibilities outlined above allows for a broad attempt at describing the nature of the image. If it is not something that human beings have but something they are, then the context in which they live will, at the very least, be a determining factor in that description. Created as people who can be addressed by God and respond to him, created in the duality of the sexes and created to exercise dominion in the world, humankind can be seen as unique in terms of the network of relationships in which they are involved. The image of God can be said to define our “constitutive relationships”<sup>66</sup> These relationships are evident in the wider context of Scripture and are focal points of God's continuing dealings with humanity, especially epitomised in the people of Israel and expressed in his covenantal dealings with them. It is this wider context to which consideration will now be given.

## **Reading the *Imago* in context**

### ***Old Testament context***

When Middleton moves from exegesis to intertextuality, it is on the basis that it is right to investigate the “wider literary and conceptual contexts” of the foundation text concerning

<sup>65</sup> C Wright, *Old Testament Ethics* p 119

<sup>66</sup> H Blocher, *In The Beginning* (Leicester: IVP 1984) p 85

the *imago*.<sup>67</sup> Intertextuality has a wide semantic range, however, in both literary and theological studies.<sup>68</sup> Middleton delimits the range of intertextuality by saying, “I propose to examine Genesis 1 in connection with other Old Testament texts that seem to share a common conceptual milieu or gestalt of terms and images, to see how these might illumine Genesis 1”.<sup>69</sup> In following a similar trajectory, the purpose here is not to offer detailed interaction with every aspect of Middleton’s presentation but to show the viability of an alternative point of view. One of the most frequently observed aspects of the creation account in Gen1:1-2:3 is its structure and the repetition of various formulae.

Since at least the eighteenth century, biblical scholars have noted that God’s creative days are divided into two triads or panels of three days each . . . The first panel (days 1-3) has to do largely with God engaging in acts of division or separation, by which the various regions or spaces or realms of the created order are brought into being, while the second panel (days 4-6) has to do with God filling these regions with living (or at least mobile) beings.<sup>70</sup>

Middleton speaks of these two panels as “regions” and “occupants” and suggests that some have seen them as corresponding to “. . . the introductory statement in 1:2 that the earth was “formless” (*tohu*) and “empty” (*bohu*)”<sup>71</sup> With few exceptions, contemporary exegetes endorse this view of the initial creation account, although not necessarily affirming the link between the two panels of creation and Gen 1:2. This focus, on the “regions” and the “occupants”, is underlined as the creation account approaches its conclusion. Gen 2:1 makes

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<sup>67</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image* p 60

<sup>68</sup> see T Ward, *Word & Supplement* (Oxford OUP 2002) pp 212-223 for an overview of that semantic range

<sup>69</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image* p 64

<sup>70</sup> *ibid* p 74. See also Wenham *Genesis 1-15* p 7 & Blenkinsopp *Creation, Un-Creation, Re-Creation* (London: T&T Clark 2011)p 20

<sup>71</sup> *ibid* pp 74-75

this clear as it speaks of these two categories, “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.” Henri Blocher observes that,

Medieval tradition had recognised that broad pattern since it distinguished the work of separation (Days1-3) from the work of the adornment (Days 4-6). It would be better to speak first of *spaces* demarcated by divine acts of separation, then the corresponding *peopling*. It can also be stressed that only the creatures of the second series are mobile (some speak of the immobile creatures for Days1-3 and of mobile creatures for the rest).<sup>72</sup>

Further, he observes that “That duality of habitation and inhabitants reappear in Isaiah 45:18.”<sup>73</sup> Adapting Blocher’s terminology, it is possible to say that the two panels of the creation account present God’s work as forming a habitat (a place to live) and the inhabitants (a people to live there). This, of course, schematises and simplifies a majestic narrative and does not tell the whole story. It has value, as will be shown later, in producing a summary statement concerning God’s creative purposes and making a link between this purpose and the wider biblical story.

Another vital element must be linked with the two noted above – the creation story is punctuated by statements concerning the blessing by God of the creation. Divine blessing is a major feature of the creation account, it is seen in 1:22 when God blesses the animals, in 1:28 where humankind receives God’s blessing and in 2:3 where it is the seventh day that is blessed. Wenham notes how בָּרַךְ often immediately follows בָּרָא and he comments, “Divine blessing continues God’s benevolent work in creation, and the writer exploits the

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<sup>72</sup> H Blocher, *In the Beginning* p 51

<sup>73</sup> *ibid*



verbal similarity between the terms to draw attention to their theological relationship.”<sup>74</sup> The frequency of the notion of blessing in Genesis prompts Wenham to comment that “The blessing of God is one of the great unifying themes of Genesis,” and that “. . . all aspects of life can express this blessing: crops, family and nation (Deut 28:1-14).”<sup>75</sup> If there is an explicit link between the blessings of 1:22 and 1:28 – that is fruitfulness and multiplication – it is not immediately obvious how the blessing of the seventh day is connected to these. Umberto Cassuto offers the suggestion that the “. . . threefold repetition indicates emphasis,” showing that the world has “. . . received from God a threefold blessing.” These blessings,

. . . are in a kind of ascending order: the fish are blessed with physical fertility: on man a twofold blessing is bestowed, comprising both physical fecundity and spiritual elevation: the benison of the Sabbath is wholly one of spiritual exaltation, a blessing imbued with sanctity. . .<sup>76</sup>

The spiritual elevation to which Cassuto refers is, in his eyes, humankind’s role as the divine image that allows them to have “dominion over the living creatures and over the earth as a whole.”<sup>77</sup> Westermann also links the blessing of 2:3 to the thought of fertility, but in a much more abstract way. “God’s blessing bestows on this special, holy, solemn day a power which makes it fruitful for human existence.”<sup>78</sup> Both Cassuto and Westermann point in the right direction, but more can be said concerning the blessings in Genesis 2:3. Gordon Wenham translates Gen 2:3 in the following way: “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, for in it he rested from all his work which God had created by making it.”<sup>79</sup> He

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<sup>74</sup> G Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* p 24

<sup>75</sup> *ibid*

<sup>76</sup> U Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis part 1* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1961) p 65

<sup>77</sup> *ibid* p 58

<sup>78</sup> C Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* p 172

<sup>79</sup> G Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* p 3

comments on the fact that the addition of “God created” results “in a fine conclusion indicating that the first section of Genesis ends here.”<sup>80</sup> More important is the fact that both of the verbs used in the creation account are used here; with the complete cessation of God’s creative activity, the reader is reminded “of all that has been achieved.”<sup>81</sup> This, of course, does not signal the end of God’s involvement with the creation. As was noted earlier, the divine blessing is indicative of God’s ongoing concern and involvement with creation. It would be a mistake, however, to think of “God resting” only in terms of the cessation of his creative work. The combination of the verbs, “create” and “make”, and the function of the verse as a concluding statement to the creation account is richer and more suggestive still. “God’s rest expresses the completion and goal of his purposes and the enjoyment of the perfection and harmony of creation.”<sup>82</sup> The blessing of the seventh day is given by God for it to be what it was meant (purposed) to be. Andrew Shead puts it in this way:

When God ‘sanctified’ the seventh Day because on it he ceased creating, he was not celebrating or commemorating days one to six, but declaring his new state of not creating to be blessed and holy. This is suggested by the close link between ‘God had completed’ and ‘he ceased’. The end of God’s creative work brought about a new type of time, blessed and set aside, presumably that what was created could now *be*. The Seventh Day was to be a day for fruitfulness, for dominion, for relationship.<sup>83</sup>

This approach is not simply a strategy for smuggling relational implications into the creation narrative; it is an expression of something fundamental to the nature of blessing.

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid* p 36

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*

<sup>82</sup> PA Barker, ‘Rest, Peace’ *DOTP* p 688

<sup>83</sup> AG Shead, ‘Sabbath’ *NDBT* p 746

Although the notion of blessing is often expressed in material terms, it is appropriate and necessary to ask whether or not these material expressions are the most fundamental features of God's acts of blessing. In his survey of older works of Old Testament theology, Claus Westermann shows that the majority of them focussed on the material aspect of blessing, or, because of the contemporary worldview, sought to show the development (or evolution) of the idea of blessing from a primitive, magical understanding to a more ethical spiritual view.<sup>84</sup> Recent OT scholarship has moved away from this outlook and KH Richards sums up the contemporary approach as follows:

Bless/blessing has most frequently been understood in terms of benefits conveyed – prosperity, power and especially fertility. This focus on the content of the benefit is now being viewed as secondary. The primary factor of blessing is the statement of relationship between parties. God blesses with a benefit on the basis of the relationship. The blessing makes known the positive relationship between the parties, whether a single individual (Gen12:1-3) or a group (Deut 7:14-16). The recipient and the others become aware of the value of the relationship and hence its durability (Job 42:12).<sup>85</sup>

It is important to note as well, that “. . . blessings and curses derive their efficacy from the power and authority of the one who utters them or serves as guarantor for carrying out their intent.” This, in the biblical narrative, is God, he is “. . . the ultimate source of power.”<sup>86</sup> In the account of creation in Gen1:1-2:3, it is God who speaks and acts to bring all things into being and it is God who blesses, creating relationships and bestowing benefits.

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<sup>84</sup> C Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Philadelphia Fortress 1978) pp 15-23

<sup>85</sup> KH Richards, 'Bless/blessing' *ABD* 1:754

<sup>86</sup> WJ Urbrock, 'Blessings and Curses' *ABD* 1:755

The link between the major concept of each panel of the creation account and the image of God is one that is clearly established in the view of many scholars. Paul Niskanen says,

Indeed, one could consider the six-day account of creation as imaging God quite explicitly under two aspects of (1) dominion – subduing the forces of chaos and creating an orderly world in days 1-3; and (2) generation – bringing forth life to inhabit the world in days 4-6. Taking v27 as a unity but not in isolation from, the surrounding context, one sees a duality of meaning unfold . . . The two-fold blessing (1) to be fertile, multiply and fill the earth, and (2) to have dominion over all other creatures on earth.<sup>87</sup>

If, as Clines suggests, “[T]he whole chapter moves towards ‘blessing’,”<sup>88</sup> then blessing, in terms of a relationship and its concomitant benefits, must be added to the basic themes of Gen 1:1-2:3. This threefold theme of Genesis1 can be expressed in a number of ways. W Sibley Towner speaks specifically of the image of God focussed on a web of relationships. These relationships can be expressed, he suggests, in the following way:

...Gen 1:26-27 and its echoes in 5:1-2 and 9:6 point human relationships in three directions. Of course, human beings are related to their creator, God, who placed the divine image in them . . . Second, we relate to each other, beginning with the simple fellowship of male and female. Third, we find ourselves in relationship with the animals, plants and the rest of created order. The text calls this relationship “dominion”.<sup>89</sup>

However these central themes are expressed, whether in terms of a web of relationships or as a progressive development (“place”, “people” and “relationship”/“blessing”), they must

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<sup>87</sup> P Niskanen, *JBL* 128, no3, p432

<sup>88</sup> D Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield Academic Press 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 1997)

p 71

<sup>89</sup> W Sibley Towner, ‘Clones of God’ *Int.* vol 59, no 4 pp 349-350

not be detached from the logic or flow of the creation account – they come into being at the initiative of God and by his word.

This threefold pattern or theme has been expressed clearly in the work of James McKeown, who sees them as not only basic to the book of Genesis, but also to the Pentateuch and throughout the Old Testament.<sup>90</sup> He highlights God's ownership of and sovereignty over the land. "The land owes its existence to him, and he creates its inhabitants, continually monitoring and supervising their behaviour." He also points to the distinctiveness of the Genesis narrative, that, "[F]ar from being a local deity with interests in one nation, God is portrayed in Genesis as the ruler of the entire universe with a personal interest in the welfare and behaviour of all its citizens (6:5-8; 11:1-9)."<sup>91</sup>

Utilising the theme of the "seed", because of the frequency that term is used in Genesis (a fact often disguised by English translations), McKeown points to its importance in the creation narrative, whereby "the existence of plants and trees are perpetuated through their seed (1:11, 12, 29)."<sup>92</sup> He goes on to say that,

The seed of each plant bears further plants of the same kind as its parent. This emphasis provides the basis for the introduction of seed in the sense of human lines of descent in which those concerned bear the same characteristics. Ultimately Genesis focuses on the line of descent that leads to Israel.<sup>93</sup>

As this theme is developed in this context of creation, it sets Israel against a universal backdrop; one that also includes blessing for the nations of the earth (12:1-3). Again, this

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<sup>90</sup> See J McKeown, who summarises his findings in *Genesis: The two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2008) pp 195-259, where he deals with the themes in the order of: descendants, blessing and land. Here the order discerned in the creation account will be followed.

<sup>91</sup> J McKeown, *Genesis* p 242

<sup>92</sup> *ibid*, p 218

<sup>93</sup> *ibid*

theme is a major element of the narrative as, “[T]he importance of the theme of blessing lies in its significance as an indicator of a person’s relationship with God.”<sup>94</sup>

The link between these fundamental, creational themes and the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) is underlined by the frequent references to that promise in McKeown’s presentation. It should also be noted that the three themes are present in the narrative of the Fall. If blessing is “an indicator of a person’s relationship with God,” and it also impacts the relationship between the man and the woman and between them the created world, then the Fall, as it is narrated in Genesis 3, disfigures and disables these relationships. What is designed to be a blessing becomes a curse.

The same threefold theme has been identified by other scholars. In his study, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, David Clines observes that if the tendency of the narrative in Genesis 1-11 is overall a negative one, particularly in terms of the story of the Fall, the Flood and the Tower of Babel, the fact that it is followed by the patriarchal promise means that, “. . . such a tendency is reversed.” In fact, “. . . the divine promise to the patriarchs then demands to be read in conjunction with Genesis 1 – as a reaffirmation of the divine intention for humanity.”<sup>95</sup> The foundational promise is expressed in Gen12:1-3:

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed,”

This call of Abram contains three basic elements that coinhere with the threefold theme of God’s creative purposes in Genesis 1. They are the land (“place”), the nation (“people”) and

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<sup>94</sup> *ibid*, p 220

<sup>95</sup> D Clines, *Theme* p 85

the blessing, not only of Abram and his descendants but “some kind of overspill of blessing beyond the Abrahamic family.”<sup>96</sup> Here, caution is needed concerning the implications of the word ‘land’ as it is used in the patriarchal promises. After noting that the word “land” (אֶרֶץ) is used 59 times in the Abrahamic cycle; Ian Hart comments that “the modern reader tends to sense nationalistic over tones in this. But in the context of Genesis the overtones are in fact of food and work.”<sup>97</sup>

Beyond Genesis, in the Exodus narrative, when God reaffirms the promises made to the patriarchs, the three themes are in evidence. Exodus 6:6-8, for example, speaks in terms of the land that was promised, the people who will “inherit” it and the relationship with God that issues in deliverance/redemption. They are all integral parts of the instructions given to Moses:

Say, therefore to the Israelites, ‘I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.

It is with some justification, therefore, that S Dean McBride Jr, approaching the creation narrative from a different perspective, can speak of it in terms of a “protocol”. By this he means “an initial memorandum – minutes or, more formally, an authoritative chronicle of God’s primordial work.” He goes on to say,

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<sup>96</sup> *ibid* p 86

<sup>97</sup> I Hart, ‘Genesis 1:1-2:3 as a Prologue to the book of Genesis’ *TB* 46.2 (1995) p 336

As a protocol, moreover, the chronicle not only documents what happened at creation “in the beginning”; it also epitomises divine procedure and purpose, setting an agenda that previews the creator’s continuing relationship to an ordered but still malleable cosmos.<sup>98</sup>

As the Old Testament narrative unfolds, the focus on these themes does not diminish; the continuing story revolves around the possession or loss of the land, the interrelationships between tribes and families within the people (and with those outside) and the presence or absence of God. Such is the pervasiveness of these topics that Christopher Wright has seen them as a framework for understanding Old Testament ethics. Researching and writing on Old Testament ethics for more than two decades, he has developed and refined a “triangular model”, the shape of which is “formed by the interrelationships between God, humanity and the earth.”<sup>99</sup> This for Wright is the “creation triangle” and his explanation of it substantially corroborates the fundamental themes of the creation narrative and their links with the *imago* as suggested above.

The relationship between God and his non-human creation . . . is something we cannot rationally comprehend. But that a relationship of some kind does exist seems to be clearly implied in the Bible, by the delight of God in his creation, by its express dependence on him, by his involvement in the suffering of its lowliest members, according to the words of Jesus about sparrows and those of Paul about the frustrations and plans of nature. And God created man and woman, an integral part of creation, but also, as the image of God, given dominion over the rest of it. Then

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<sup>98</sup> SD McBride Jr, ‘Divine Protocol: Gen 1:-2:3 as Prologue to the Pentateuch’ in *God who Creates* WP Brown and SD McBride Jr eds (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2000) p 7

<sup>99</sup> CJH Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord* (Downers Grove: IVP 1995) p 26. See his earlier *Living as the People of God* and *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* where his understanding and use of this ‘triangle’ is explained more fully.



God dwelt, ‘walked and talked’, with these persons in the midst of the earth he had given to them in a triangle of relationships that God saw as ‘very good’.<sup>100</sup>

Wright develops this triangular model in a number of ways showing how it applies in the story of Israel and the land (the redemption triangle), to the Church (the typological triangle) and to the “. . . redeemed, transformed and perfect new creation” (the eschatological triangle).<sup>101</sup> The threefold theme of the creation account (Gen 1:1-2:3) introduces a major chord that is sounded through the Old Testament narrative and is intimately connected with the creation of humanity in God’s image (Gen1:26-28). It places the concept of dominion within the network of relationships that should not be dismissed or downplayed.<sup>102</sup>

Returning to the more immediate context of Gen 1:26-28; brief consideration needs to be given to the relationship of these verses to the ‘second’ creation account of Genesis 2. In answer to the question “What is God making?”; Middleton says that “the unequivocal answer given from the perspective of the rest of the Old Testament is this: God is building a *temple*.”<sup>103</sup> While Middleton marshals evidence from both the Old Testament and the ancient Near East to substantiate his claim, other scholars attend to the “second” creation account, particularly Gen 2:8-17, because, the emphasis is on the role of the human being in the garden sanctuary. “In terms of literary structure, 2:8a describes the creation of the garden and 2:8b the placing of the man there. In what follows, 2:9-15 elaborates on 2:8a and

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<sup>100</sup> *ibid* p 27

<sup>101</sup> *ibid* p 38

<sup>102</sup> In fact, it is a major chord sounded through the whole of Scripture as, for example, the closing of the Book of Revelation bears witness. Rev 21:1-8 speaks of the recreated heavens and earth (the “place”), the redeemed, pictured as the Bride of Christ (the “people”) and the dwelling of God with his people (“relationship”/“blessing”).

<sup>103</sup> R Middleton, *Liberating Image*, p 81

2:16-17 elaborates on 2:8b.”<sup>104</sup> Within that structure the human being is seen to function as “a kind of priest in the garden sanctuary”.<sup>105</sup> Gentry provides a list of seven pieces of evidence to show that “Eden” is to be understood as a sanctuary. These include the presence of God, the geographical orientation of the garden, the verbal similarity between Adam’s task and that of the Levites later in the Torah, and the river that provides life for the garden and beyond.<sup>106</sup> Gordon Wenham concludes that “. . . there are many other features of the garden that suggest it is seen as an archetypal sanctuary, prefiguring the later tabernacles and temples.”<sup>107</sup> In Psalm 8 (which is often considered to be a commentary on Gen1:26-28) verses 5 to 8 reflect on the creation of humankind as the image of God and expand on their role in exercising dominion. It should be noted that although this exercise of dominion occupies the major part of these verses, the Psalm speaks first of the affinity between human beings and God (or divine beings/angels, according to the NRSV margin), before moving on to the notion of dominion. The exercise of this dominion has a purpose according to Psalm 8, it is not just an end in itself. Humanity has what may be described as a priestly function as it spreads the glory of God through all creation.<sup>108</sup> There is, therefore, some warrant for this approach to Genesis 2 and it has implications for the way the doctrine of the *imago* is understood. William Dumbrell points towards these implications in the following way:

The garden also operates as a divine sanctuary, the point where the immediacy of the divine presence was encountered and enjoyed. In short, created in the world with dominion over it, man is immediately abstracted from the world and placed directly in the divine presence. What is being said in all this is surely how the dominion

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<sup>104</sup> P Gentry, ‘Kingdom through Covenant’ p 38

<sup>105</sup> *ibid*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*; See further GK Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (Leicester: IVP 2004) pp 66-80

<sup>107</sup> G Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* p 61

<sup>108</sup> Verses 1 and 9 of Psalm 8 begin and end the Psalm with the same ascription of praise to God, which governs the purpose and theme of the Psalm.

mandate was to be exercised. What is stressed in that command of Gen1:28 can only function with the set of divine/human relationships which chapter 2 proceeds to construct. Thus in Gen 2 we are offered a model of how man thereafter is to regulate the world over which he has been set . . . The complete congruity between man and his garden environment (cf 2:19) as well as the idyllic male/female relationships to which the latter half of the chapter points, function as illustrations of the manner in which dominion over ordered nature was to proceed . . . Man was to control his world, not primarily by immersing himself in the tasks of ordering it, but by recognising that there was a system of priorities by which all of regulated life was to be controlled. If he were rightly related to his creator, then he would rightly respond to creation.<sup>109</sup>

For the present purpose, two significant things need to be noted from Dumbrell's analysis. The first is the web of relationships that are involved in constructing the garden as a sanctuary. To fulfil the assigned role in the garden/sanctuary, 'adām needs a set of ordered relationships – first with God and then with other humans and with the created order. The second thing of note is that the dominion mandate is not to be viewed as the totality of the *imago*, but rather as an integral part of God's whole purpose for humankind. It can only operate as part of the divine design plan within a given set of relationships. It is of further note that these relationships in Genesis 2 function particularly through the medium of speech. As 'adām speaks, so the animals are classified and named. The relationship between the man and the woman is marked by speech, and God's presence and relationship to the human beings is indicated in his speaking to them.

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<sup>109</sup> WJ Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Carlisle: Paternoster 1984) pp 35&36

There are only two other direct references to the image of God in the Old Testament and both are both found in Genesis (5:1&3 & 9:6). Gen 5:3 is part of the *toledoth* of Adam, the one “made in the likeness of God” (5:1). It records that “he became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image.” There has been considerable discussion as to whether or not the *toledoth* of Genesis are reviewing what has happened or setting up the narrative that is to come. Etymologically the word is derived from the verb ‘to beget’, which may be indicative of the introductory nature of the formula. More important, however, is its use, which shows clearly that it is introducing a new character or “chapter” in the narrative.<sup>110</sup> In Genesis 5 another son of Adam is introduced and his family line is recorded ending with the next major character in the narrative sequence, Noah. Also, at this point, the idea of father and son is juxtaposed with that of image and likeness. The use of the term ‘likeness’ in Genesis 5:1 is thought by HW Wolff “. . . to guard against the misunderstanding that correspondence indicates identity only, and not differentiation within the similarity as well.” But, he also suggests that “it could also emphasize the nearness and relationship, just as the double expression in Gen. 5:3. . . underlines the close relationship between the two.”<sup>111</sup> While the New Testament does not avoid son/children language concerning humanity in relation to God, the Old Testament seems more reluctant to use it so as to avoid any pantheistic notions arising concerning their nature. “‘Son’ rather than ‘image’ could have suggested that mankind possessed divinity, the idea that had to be banned.”<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, the link can be established, according to Randall Garr:

Although humanity as a whole intimately reflects and participates in the divine image, ‘image’ is expressed deferentially between generations; a child’s image only

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<sup>110</sup> For a detailed study of the *toledoth* formula see MA Thomas, *These are the Generations – Identity, Covenant and the Toledot Formula* (London: T & T Clark, 2011)

<sup>111</sup> HW Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press 1974) p161

<sup>112</sup> H Blocher, *In the Beginning* p 90. See Luke 3:38 and Acts 17:28

approximates that of the parent . . . A child must ‘honor’ his/her parents as stated in the fifth commandment and its analogues. . . That is to say, the child-parent relationship should imitate a basic relationship with God. Just as God is revered, so are parents. . . To honor one’s parents is to maintain, on a nuclear scale, the order of God’s cosmos.<sup>113</sup>

Edward Curtis also comments on Gen 5:3 and Adam becoming the father of Seth saying that “the way in which a son resembles his father is in some way analogous to the way in which the human is like God.” But more than resemblance is involved in his view, for although the “capacity for relationship with God” is possible, the father-son analogy can also be functional. He sums this up by saying that “the son is the image of his father because he functions both like his father and on behalf of his father.”<sup>114</sup> The threefold pattern of relations, “with God, within the human community and with the rest of creation,” is also explored by Marsha Wilfong.<sup>115</sup> She comments on Gen 5:3 as follows:

The description in 5:3 that Seth bore the “likeness/image” of his father Adam implies that the promise and vocation of humankind at creation continues from generation to generation. Yet the suggestion also lingers that human beings are not only creatures among the rest of creation, but are also in some sense related to God as children to a parent in a way that the rest of creation is not. The familial relationship between God and human creatures, later expressed in relation to God’s covenant (e.g., Exod. 4:22-23; Jer. 31:9; Isa. 64:8; Hos. 11:1-4), is already implied in the fact that humans are created in God’s image.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> R Garr, *In His Own image* p 229

<sup>114</sup> E Curtis, ‘Image of God (OT)’ *ABD* 3:389

<sup>115</sup> M Wilfong, ‘Human Creation in Canonical Context’, in *God who Creates* WP Brown and SD McBride Jr eds p 42

<sup>116</sup> *ibid*, p 43

The fact that the term, the image of God, does not appear explicitly in the Old Testament beyond Genesis 1-11, has often been noted. James Luther Mays describes it as “. . . an apparent anomaly that ‘image of God’ does not recur in the rest of the Old Testament.”<sup>117</sup> This does not, in the eyes of most scholars, diminish its importance for biblical anthropology. Its location in the creation account gives it a fundamental importance in determining the way humanity is viewed in the later narratives. As has already been shown, part of the uniqueness of humanity as the image of God, is its place within the design and purpose of the creator. Made to be an integral part in a web of relationships, with God, with each other and with the created world, it is clear that these relationships extend beyond Genesis 1-11. It was noted above, from the work of McKeown, Clines and Wright and my own formulation of the purpose and promise of God, that Gen 12:1-3 expresses a foundational promise that can be traced through the Old Testament canon. James Mays suggests that in these verses “. . . a further identification of human beings beyond creation is inaugurated by God.” This “inauguration” is again effected by God speaking, “[I]t is a particular identity constituted by a command and promise.”<sup>118</sup> Although this identity is principally seen in the covenant people of God, the rest of humanity is not excluded. Mays also says:

While “image of God” is no longer used for the human beings in the biblical story, its actuality is a structural theme of the biblical account of God and humankind. The actuality continues in the calling and destiny of human beings to represent and resemble God in the world. When this calling and destiny is given to some it assumes and continues the purpose and possibility vested in the creation of

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<sup>117</sup> JL Mays, *The Self in the Psalms and the Image of God*, *God and Human Dignity* RK Soulen & L Woodhead eds (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2006) p 38

<sup>118</sup> *ibid*

humankind. The pivotal defining text is Exodus 19:3-6, God's inaugural words to Israel as a covenant people. Israel is given a role and a destiny to represent and resemble God among the people of the world. Through an existence defined by the demands and promise of the covenant, Israel will have a particular and special relation to the Lord as God's priestly kingdom and holy nation who represent God's sovereignty over all the earth . . . The Israelites' identity and destiny as the people of the Lord is a movement towards the realisation of humanity's identity and destiny as the image of God.<sup>119</sup>

The identity of this covenant people can also be characterised by the term "Son of God", further underlying the link with the notion of the *imago* and the continuing purpose of God for humankind.<sup>120</sup>

Although it has not been possible to undertake a complete survey of the Old Testament context in which the *imago* is situated, the above account allows certain conclusions to be drawn. First, it is clear that a relational understanding of the image of God has a "common conceptual milieu or gestalt of terms and images"<sup>121</sup> within the Old Testament, to the same extent, at the very least, as the functional understanding of Middleton and others. This re-examination of the evidence has not been to deny that humankind has been given dominion over the created order; rather it is to maintain that dominion is not the essential element of the image but a consequence of it. While the scriptural narrative nowhere defines or comprehensively delineates what the image *is*, it does make clear that for humans, *being* the image of God enables and involves a certain web of relationships. In the second place, it has

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<sup>119</sup> *ibid* pp38 & 39

<sup>120</sup> pointed out by Mays, *ibid* p39

<sup>121</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image* p64

been argued that there is a coherent pattern to these relationships that has been set, in the creation narrative, by the purpose of the creator. The story of the creation of humankind in the image of God echoes, or better, mirrors the creational purposes of God. The themes of place (land), people and blessing are integral to the story of human beginnings and places humanity in a situation where relationship to the created order, to each other and to God are possible. Finally, as there is no clear evidence for the use of a “royal metaphor in Genesis 1” it is safer to build any conclusion on what is there; Genesis 1 and its immediate biblical context would seem to point to a relational, or even filial, metaphor being more appropriate to sum up the creation of humankind in God’s image.

### ***The ancient Near Eastern context***

The undoubted benefits of comparative study have been briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, as have some of the problems that also arise. This study is not the place to attempt an analysis and evaluation of the method. Rather some observations concerning its use regarding the interpretation of the image of God will be made.

The ancient Near East offers two possible sources of comparative literature, which may be placed alongside the Hebrew scripture: texts from Egypt and from Mesopotamia. In recent literature, Edward Curtis advocates the Egyptian influence over the image of God tradition in Israel and Richard Middleton argues for Mesopotamian influence. Both are clear that in the sources they are working with, a determining factor is the royal ideology that lies behind it. However, as has already been noted, this ideology is not evident in the Genesis narrative, and the influence not as strong as they advocate. What is also unclear in their advocacy for these respective influences is how and when this happened. Concerning when this influence entered the tradition of Israel, Curtis suggests that it was “at an early date” and that it



“remained somewhat isolated in that tradition without being developed elsewhere in the preexilic literature.”<sup>122</sup> This ‘isolation’ is, according to Curtis, to prevent any tendency to idolatry in an already threatened tradition. “In the new religious context created by the Exile and return, the ‘image of God’ motif was again taken up and developed both in the intertestamental period and in the NT.”<sup>123</sup> Curtis suggestions here are viable for both Egyptian and Mesopotamian influence. A further element that they have in common is that their concept of the image of God is related to a royal ideology. It is the king who is in a particular relationship with his god and exercises power as the representative (even the representation) of that god. This ideology is taken and transformed in the Israelite tradition, according to the advocates of this view, and becomes the province of all people. Once again it is difficult to see evidence of this on the surface of Genesis 1.

The “how” question, concerning the transmission of these influences seems rarely to be addressed other than by speaking of the general cultural milieu of the ancient Near East. This does not, or should not, assume an homogeneity between all of the cultures; true comparative study will discover and analyse not only the similarities but also the dissimilarities. Kenneth Kitchen acknowledges the value of comparative study when he observes: “[I]t should be said that there is nothing inherently wrong in cultural borrowing or transfer; it can be a source of enrichment.” His caution, in approaching this kind of study has not always been heeded, however. He goes on to say:

. . . denial of the unique elements in any culture, or misreading the elements of one culture in terms of another only produces gross distortion of the understanding, whether it be in relation to Old Testament religion and literature or to any other Ancient Near Eastern culture. . . In fact, it is necessary to deal individually and on

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<sup>122</sup> E Curtis, ‘Image of God (OT)’ *ABD* 3:391

<sup>123</sup> *ibid*

its own merits with each possible or alleged case of relationship or borrowing by making a detailed comparison of the full available data from both the Old Testament and the Ancient Orient and by noting the results.<sup>124</sup>

Earlier in this chapter a comparison was made between the language of Genesis 1 and an Akkadian inscription, where both use the terms “image” and “likeness”. Although the similarities were noted, the interpretation suggested was not proposed solely on the basis of the comparative evidence, but by also reading the Genesis text in context. The Akkadian text was used to enrich (to use Kitchen’s word) the text of Genesis 1, not to control the interpretation. One of the problems in assuming a word in Hebrew (for example) has the same meaning throughout the canon is that it does not take the context into account. A simple illustration of this is the word for “flesh” (בשר) a contextual understanding of this word will generate a variety of meanings (Ps 136:25 – all living creatures; Is 40:5 – all human beings; Is 40:6 – humanity as mortal; Gen 9:4 – meat to eat; Gen 2:24 – the marriage union; etc.). If this is problematic within a single language and culture, the difficulty is compounded when comparing cross-cultural and linguistic examples. As David Tsumura says:

Whenever we talk about the sameness of two items in a certain language, we must ask the question: in what sense and why? For, in many cases the “sameness” is only superficial or even “fictional”. It is meaningful to talk about the sameness between X and Y only when their differences are clearly identifiable. In this respect, the degree of sameness or dissimilarity (differences) is more important than the fact that sameness exists. This is all the more true when we try to identify the same

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<sup>124</sup> KA Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press 1966) pp 87-88

expression in two languages, for there is no reason why the same form should always have the same meaning in two cognate languages.<sup>125</sup>

Tsumura examines the arguments concerning the so-called *Chaoskampf Myth* in the earlier part of his book and argues that there is no observable connection between it and the background and text of Genesis 1. Two of his conclusions have implications for this study at this point.

The first of these is a hermeneutical concern, that is, how the text of Genesis 1 is to be read. And, in the first place, that reading must be “on its own merits” (to use Kitchen’s words again). This means reading it with the cultural and conceptual terms available to the author(s). Commenting on the words usually translated in Gen1:2 “without form and void” (RSV), he claims that the writer is simply wishing to convey the earth as “an unproductive and uninhabited place,” rather than alluding to a Canaanite creation myth. The point is that:

. . . to communicate the subject of creation meaningfully to human beings, one must use the language and literary forms known to them. In order to give the background information to the audience in this verse, the author uses experiential language, explaining the initial situation of the earth as “not yet.”<sup>126</sup>

A similar approach can be applied to the question of interpreting the notion of the image of God. While the discussion of it has become increasingly complex, mainly through the introduction of comparative material, the suggestion of James McKeown merits attention; that is, that “presumably the concept was clear to the writer and to the first readers.”<sup>127</sup> He assumes that there must have been some common understanding of the concept or that

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<sup>125</sup> DT Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction* (Winona Lake: E2005) isenbrauns p 148 n 33. His comments on “Methodological Principles” and the examples that he gives are very instructive pp 146-155

<sup>126</sup> *ibid* p 35

<sup>127</sup> J McKeown, *Genesis*, p 281

understanding could be gained by reading what had been written in the book. His conclusion is that:

... we should look for the meaning of the image of God in Genesis itself. It is very likely that, if Genesis is making an important point through the concept of the image of God, this point will not only be compatible with the overall message of Genesis but also will be made and emphasized in other ways in the book.<sup>128</sup>

The basic contention of both Tsumura and McKeown is that, while comparative studies are useful, ancient Near Eastern texts should not be privileged over the text of Genesis itself.

This leads to the second conclusion of Tsumura's that impacts this study. It is a conclusion that emphasises the dissimilarity of the Genesis account from those of surrounding cultures; a difference that is essentially one of worldview. He states his conclusion as follows:

It is true that in Mesopotamian and Canaanite pantheons certain deities such as Marduk, Ea and El were called "the creator (or the lord) of heaven and earth," but in Old Testament theology, when Yahweh- Elohim is represented as the creator of heaven and earth (eg Gen 1:1; 14:22), the author is saying not only that he is incomparable in relation to other gods but also that, as the actual creator, he is the only god who can be truly called a god; that is, he is God.<sup>129</sup>

There is here, therefore, a clash of worldviews, where the Genesis narrative is to be seen not as a development (or even an evolution) of earlier views, nor as rewriting of contemporary views. Rather, it is to be seen as a polemic directed at, and in contradistinction to the views of the surrounding cultures. According to Brevard Childs, "[T]he priestly writer has broken the myth with the affirmation of [Gen] 1:1." But, it is not entirely destroyed; instead the

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<sup>128</sup> *ibid*

<sup>129</sup> DT Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction* p 140

writer takes up elements “. . . he could use, he reshaped the tradition to serve as a witness to his understanding of reality.”<sup>130</sup>

This, however, is not an adequate assessment for Gerhard Hasel. After setting out his methodological concerns, which are very similar to Kitchen’s quoted above, he examines the Hebrew and Babylonian creation accounts. His conclusion is as follows:

With a great many safeguards Gen 1 employs certain terms and motifs, partly taken from ideological and theologically incompatible predecessors and partly chosen in deliberate contrast to comparable ancient Near Eastern concepts, and uses them with a meaning and emphasis not only consonant with but expressive of the purpose, world-view, and understanding of reality as expressed in this Hebrew account of creation . . . It appears that the Genesis cosmology represents not only a “complete break” with the ancient Near Eastern mythological cosmologies but represents a parting of the spiritual ways brought about by a conscious and deliberate antimythical polemic which meant an undermining of the prevailing mythological cosmologies.<sup>131</sup>

In this quotation the words “complete break” are taken from Nahum Sarna, who is also prepared to speak in terms of distinct worldviews. The distinction between the world-views of Mesopotamia and of the Genesis narrative is nowhere more obvious to Sarna than in the creation account. A major difference is in the fact that Genesis 1 does not contain what he calls, a “theo-biography” (or theogony), whereas in the Mesopotamian accounts “[T]heogony is inextricably tied up with cosmogony.”<sup>132</sup> In a cultural milieu where anything from an ant to a celestial body could be deified the creation account of Genesis is “an

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<sup>130</sup> B Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (London SCM Press 1962) p 43

<sup>131</sup> G Hasel, ‘The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology’ *EQ* 46 (1974) p 91

<sup>132</sup> N Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken 1966) p 10

explicit polemic against the creation myth. Polytheism is removed, and with it the theogony and theomachy that are so vital in the Mesopotamian mythology.”<sup>133</sup> The only part of the created order that can be said to be like God in any way is humanity: and the nature of humanity is not spelled out in any exact way because Genesis was written in a culture that was rife with idolatry.<sup>134</sup>

If the distinctiveness of the Genesis worldview over against that of Mesopotamia has implications for the study of Genesis 1; that is, to make it the focus of study and not of putative parallels; to view it “on its own merits,” rather than to privilege ancient Near Eastern texts; there is a further implication that needs to be considered. The distinctiveness of the Genesis worldview as compared with the contemporary (21<sup>st</sup> century) Western worldview needs to be recognised. This is not the place for a detailed analysis of the Western worldview; however, some tentative lines may be drawn between today’s worldview and that of the ancient Near East that may shed light on the tendency to privilege comparative studies.

A starting point for the investigation of these connections is found in Christopher Kaiser’s discussion of the offence to modernity that is presented by the Old Testament witness to God. He speaks of the “absoluteness and the finality of the claims of Yahweh,” which he describes in this way:

The God Yahweh will not share our adoration with other members of a pantheon. He demands total allegiance from his followers, and that is enough to discourage most moderns and postmoderns, suspicious as we are of fanaticism or extremes of any

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<sup>133</sup> A Konkel, *NIDOTTE* 1:607

<sup>134</sup> See on this J McKeown, *Genesis* pp281-282. And see further P Gentry, *Kingdom through Covenant*, p37 for the idea that humanity’s appointment “to rule” disenfranchises the heavenly council (gods), so further subverting Mesopotamian ideology.

kind. The Bible does not deny that there may be other ‘gods’ that can influence our lives and become the focus of our occasional worship.<sup>135</sup>

It is this God who is offensive to modern and postmodern minds for two reasons. First, “God is presented as a *person* to whom we can only relate personally.” Second, “he is *transcendent*, extending beyond the farthest reach of our religious understanding.”<sup>136</sup> What, according to Kaiser, is the nature of this double “offence”? Kaiser explains it in the following way:

If Yahweh were an ultimately impersonal force or field of some kind, he would be fair game for the analytical tools of modern philosophy. Then we could debate the relative weights of evidence for and against various theological propositions, all the while avoiding any uncomfortable confrontation with God himself. This won’t do, however, if he is personal – *transcendently personal*. If, on the other hand, he were one manifestation of deity alongside others, a god of nature or the spirit of progress, then we could simply celebrate the richness he adds to our lives . . . without becoming entangled in a commitment that involves the whole of our lives. Again, this won’t do if he is transcendent, *personally transcendent*.<sup>137</sup>

Although Kaiser does not refer, at this point, to worldviews, they are at the root of what he is claiming and there is a clash between them. The worldview of Genesis (and the Bible generally) is marked by a distinctiveness, the difference between Creator and creation. The alternative view is one of continuity, that all things that exist are part of each other, whether ‘gods’, human beings, or the natural world.<sup>138</sup> This latter view is often designated pantheism, in which God is everything; this does not mean that every existent thing is god,

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<sup>135</sup> CB Kaiser, *The Doctrine of God* (Eugene Wipf & Stock 2001) pp 1- 2

<sup>136</sup> *ibid* p 2

<sup>137</sup> *ibid*

<sup>138</sup> I owe this form of expression to John Oswalt, see his *The Bible among the Myths* (Grand Rapids Zondervan 2009) pp 47-49

but that god is the totality of all that exists. Allied to this approach is that of panentheism, which says that everything is in god, but that does not exhaust the meaning and reality of god. This is probably a more accurate description of the worldview of the ancient Near East. A differently nuanced approach is taken by Colin Gunton, while still addressing the same basic issue as Kaiser. He suggests that the most fundamental question that can be raised is this: “[I]s the universe in some way divine, in the sense that it accounts of itself for the way that it is, or is it the creation of an agent who is other than it, and specifically, personal?”<sup>139</sup> Even a contemporary view of the world, such as materialism, can still be, in a sense, a form of pantheism, in that by its reduction of all distinctiveness, everything is part of the one, it is “nothing but” matter and motion.<sup>140</sup> In the words of Vern Poythress, “the many – the diversity of phenomena – all flow into this one.”<sup>141</sup> Further, where materialism is the dominant worldview, the foundation of that worldview must be impersonal. However human beings view their nature and that of the world, they “themselves are ultimately held in being by impersonal regularities.”<sup>142</sup> If the foundation of reality is, according to this view, impersonal, then how do human beings have any personal significance? The answer is often to overlay this impersonal foundation with more person-centred notions concerning morality, community, truth and beauty, for example. Or, they may personalise the natural forces they observe in the world around. The most common way of doing this is to speak of Nature in personal terms (eg “Mother Nature”). Poythress sums this up in the following way:

A hard-nosed scientific materialism in one part of the mind can actually be combined with a soft yearning for communion with spirits; people can travel towards

<sup>139</sup> C Gunton, *The Triune Creator* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1998) p 37

<sup>140</sup> cf D MacKay’s critique of “nothing but” in *Christianity in a Mechanistic Universe* DM MacKay ed (London: IVF 1965) pp57-59

<sup>141</sup> VS Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview* (Wheaton: Crossway 2012) p 31

<sup>142</sup> *ibid* p 30



new forms of animism, spiritism, polytheism and pantheism. Everyday people within advanced industrial societies are looking into astrology and fortune telling and spirits and meditation. When a viewpoint includes spirits and gods, it may in a sense appear to be *personalist*. But ultimately it is *impersonalist*, because the “one” dissolves what is distinctive to persons.<sup>143</sup>

One may add that, although this attempt at personalism is not always explicit, it is often implicit, becoming evident in the actual language that is used to describe “natural” processes, such as that of “choice” and “self-determination”.

Colin Gunton, for example, quotes from Peter Atkins, “a particularly egregious proponent of personalising” according to Gunton, and comments on Atkins’ language and logic in the following way:

Once molecules have *learned to compete* and to *create* other molecules in their own image, elephants and things resembling elephants will, in due course, be found to be roaming through the countryside. (Just like that!) More is to come: molecules are ‘equipped’ (by whom and for what?), they ‘eat’ other molecules, though we are not always sure which eat and which are eaten, they ‘keep’ less successful molecules ‘in herds’ and so on and that is all by the second page of the book.<sup>144</sup>

The same kind of points are made by Mary Midgley on Atkins’ book; she claims that his language and “misuse of the concept of Chaos marks a fairly complete bankruptcy of real explanation.”<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> *ibid* pp 30-31

<sup>144</sup> G Gunton, *The Triune Creator* p38 emphasis added

<sup>145</sup> quoted in *ibid*

However subtle the nuances of this contemporary view are, its distance from the ancient Near Eastern worldview is not very great. Similar efforts are made to personalise an otherwise impersonal (and perhaps hostile) reality. The gods of the ancient Near East are perceived of in mainly human terms, even if those terms are ‘writ large’ in the case of the gods. They “. . . are born and suckled, grow to maturity, contest for satisfaction of appetites and emotions, battle for prestige and power and mastery, indulge in sex and are subject to failure, defeat and death.”<sup>146</sup> Using a similar catalogue of characteristics, Karen van der Toorn says that, “Mesopotamia’s religion was a receptive form of polytheism, ‘an open system . . . a kaleidoscopic repertoire of divinities who personify various aspects of reality.’”<sup>147</sup> While a counter-example might be suggested in Egypt during the reign of Akhenaton, who is often described as a monotheist, it does not constitute a major interruption in the polytheism of Egyptian religion. Aton, the god “promoted” by Akhenaton, was the sun personified as a god. There was no direct relation between Aton and the Egyptian people, moreover the god depicted as the sun with many arms, only fulfilling a mechanistic and regulatory function. “This deity could never be a *personal* god” is the judgement of Egyptologist, David Redford.<sup>148</sup> Akhenaton’s attempt to impose “monotheism” on Egypt, did not last much beyond his reign and the nation reverted to polytheism that had only been suppressed not replaced. It may be argued at this point that the distinctions between pantheism, panentheism and polytheism are being blurred, and in a sense this is true. The blurring of the lines between them happens because they are all built in the same foundation. None of them are premised on a clear Creator/creation distinction;

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<sup>146</sup> HC Brichito, *The Names of God* p 57 quoted in J Walton *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* p 102

<sup>147</sup> K van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia*, p 4, quoted in J Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought* pp102-103

<sup>148</sup> DB Redford, *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) p 381

whatever semi-personal layers are built on this foundation, they all start with the continuity of all things. Gunton comments on a recent trend in the writings of popularizers of science that it seems to be the case that, “when the being of the world is no longer attributed to the personal agency of God it is itself made the bearer of divine or creative powers. In a word something like pantheism is generated.”<sup>149</sup> The desire for unity, for order, even for control is something that lies behind the myths and cults of the ancient Near East and is a desire that often drives modern science. It happens in an undoubtedly more sophisticated and generally beneficial way, but as Stephen Hawking says, “the eventual goal of science is to provide a single theory that describes the whole universe.”<sup>150</sup> And it does that within the closed system of the material world. To quote Gunton once more:

How easily it happens that where God is no longer understood as the overall creator and upholder of the universe there is a reversion to the pagan attribution of agency to the impersonal worlds of molecules, evolution and chaos. The choice is inescapable: either God or the world itself provides the reason why things are as they are. To ‘personalise’ the universe or parts of it, particularly inert substances like molecules, is to succumb to crude forms of superstition.<sup>151</sup>

Theologians are not immune, of course, from the prevailing worldview, and if they operate in a culture that disputes or denies the Creator/creation distinction, the turn to comparative studies is understandable. There, it is possible to deal with ideas, texts and even artefacts that provide analysable data that gives a certain “scientific” ethos to the discipline. Other ways are to be found, of course, that do not necessarily involve a turn to comparative study,

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<sup>149</sup> C Gunton, *The Triune Creator* p 37

<sup>150</sup> S Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* p 10 quoted in R Trigg, *Rationality and Science* (Oxford: Blackwell 1995) p 139

<sup>151</sup> C Gunton, *The Triune Creator* p39

but nonetheless minimise, blur or negate the Creator/creation distinction. Paul Molnar offers indications of the “confusion and reversal of the creature-creator relationship.” They are:

(1) the trend towards making God, in some sense, dependent upon and indistinguishable from history; (2) the lack of precision in Christology, which leads to the idea of Jesus, in his humanity as such, as revealer; (3) the failure to distinguish the Holy Spirit from the human spirit; (4) a trend to begin theology with experiences of self-transcendence, thus allowing experience rather than the object of faith to determine the truth of theology.<sup>152</sup>

Molnar deals with these issues, analysing current trends in theology that, in particular, neglect a “proper doctrine of the immanent Trinity,” and he also builds on constructive proposals by Barth, Torrance and Gunton. Without this “proper doctrine of the immanent Trinity . . . God becomes dependent upon creation and humanity in some way, shape or form.”<sup>153</sup> Indeed he is prepared to use the term “pantheism” for this approach, as it “never even sees the need for another outside itself because . . . pantheism identifies God with creation.”<sup>154</sup> This kind of worldview will readily legitimate and encourage a comparative study of religions, both ancient and modern. What is unacceptable according to its canons is a worldview that claims to be distinct, even exclusive. In such an environment, it is no surprise that the comparative approach is privileged over others.

In all that has been said above, the purpose has not been to disparage or deny the usefulness of comparative study. There has been no intention to argue a case against its use, rather, it has been the intention to offer some thinking and cautions concerning it on a number of

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<sup>152</sup> P Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* (London: T&T Clark 2002) p

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<sup>153</sup> *ibid* p 315

<sup>154</sup> *ibid*

levels. In the first place, as with all hermeneutical procedures, comparative study is not a neutral or value-free study of the evidence. Often the agenda behind it is concerned to assert continuity of thought and action; it, therefore, majors on similarities rather than dissimilarities. It can fail to handle difference, as this is not conducive to its underlying worldview. Second, comparative study is often privileged in the approach to the Old Testament, and in particular instances such as the interpretation of the image of God. It can be used sometimes to minimise the demands of the text and of the God who stands behind the text as Christopher Kaiser argues. Further, it can be used to reinforce the presuppositions of the interpreter. It should be noted here, that this is not a direct criticism of Richard Middleton as he does highlight the differences in the Old Testament view of the image of God that challenge the ideology of Mesopotamia (although his approach to the Mesopotamian data may be conditioned to a degree by his own political presuppositions). Third, comparative study needs to place more emphasis at times on the difference in worldviews between the Old Testament and the ancient Near East. This would, at the very least, enable it to be “comparative” in a fuller sense of that word. To simply assert that something in the Old Testament is the same as a concept in the ancient Near East has its own difficulties. As Arthur Gibson points out, before the comparison can be made, there is an ambiguity in the English word “same” that must be clarified.<sup>155</sup> Finally, the privileging of material from the ancient Near East often leads to a lack of focus on the primary text in the Old Testament. To return to the comment from James McKeown referred to earlier in this chapter and to complete the quotation:

Discussions on the image of God have become quite complicated, but presumably the concept was clear to the writer and to the first readers. We may assume that the

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<sup>155</sup> A Gibson, *Biblical Semantic Logic* (London:Sheffield Academic Press 2001) pp 140-143

writer expected the readers to know what the image of God meant or to understand the meaning by reading the book. Therefore, we should look for the meaning of the image of God in Genesis itself. It is very likely that, if Genesis is making an important point through the concept of the image of God, this point will not only be compatible with the overall message of Genesis but also will be made and emphasised in other ways in the book.<sup>156</sup>

And for McKeown that meaning is polemical, to deny that anything in the natural world can be deified and that only human beings can be seen as “. . . the only creature who was like God in some way.” That approach taken by McKeown is also advocated by John Walton (and adopted by this study) who sums it up by saying, “[C]omparative study does not impose something foreign upon the text; rather it seeks to rediscover that which is intrinsic to the text.”<sup>157</sup>

### ***The New Testament context***

A striking feature of Middleton's work is the paucity of references to the New Testament; those that are used do not have a direct bearing on the doctrine of the *imago*. And yet, for any Christian formulation of the doctrine, at least some account must be taken of the appropriate texts.<sup>158</sup> Gerald Bray, after an examination of the idea of the *imago* in the Intertestamental period points out that in “the pages of the New Testament, we enter a far more sober and less speculative atmosphere.” And although the vocabulary of image (εἰκὼν) and likeness (ὁμοιωσις) is used, there are, according to Bray, only a few direct

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<sup>156</sup> J McKeown, *Genesis* p 281

<sup>157</sup> J Walton in *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention*, DI Block ed. (Nashville B&H Publishing 2008) p 327

<sup>158</sup> See on this, for example, R Schultz, 'What is Canonical about Canonical Biblical Theology?' in *Biblical Theology, Retrospect and Prospect* SJ Hafemann ed (Leicester: Apollos 2002)

references to the image of God in humankind.<sup>159</sup> Some have seen, for example, the saying of Jesus concerning the images of God and Caesar as alluding to Gen 1:26-28. This connection is not supported by many contemporary commentators. Davies and Allison trace this interpretation back to Tertullian, but they themselves are “unsure whether there is an allusion to Gen1:26.”<sup>160</sup> Commenting on the saying in Mark’s Gospel, Morna Hooker says, concerning whether or not there is an allusion to Gen 1:26, “[A]lthough the saying is probably less subtle than this, it certainly suggests that man’s duty to God is something much more important than his duty to Caesar.”<sup>161</sup> In a comment on the passage in Luke’s Gospel, Howard Marshall questions the idea of G Bornkamm that humanity, “as bearers of God’s imago, should recognise his authority over them.” He goes on to say, “[T]his, however, is more a (correct) theological deduction from the saying than an inherent element in the argument, the comparison being more between Caesar and God than between coins and men.”<sup>162</sup> Calvin, in his *Harmony of the Gospels*, makes a similar point, stressing the appropriate responses to the authority of both God and Caesar and not alluding to Gen 1:26 at all.<sup>163</sup>

The majority of the uses of εἰκὼν in the New Testament refer to Christ as the image of God. There is only one clear use of the word in the Pauline corpus that is directly concerned with humanity as the image, and that is 1 Cor 11:7. The word ὁμοιωσις is only used once in the New Testament to express the idea of humanity as the imago of God, that is James 3:9. It is with this text that the following brief overview of New Testament usage will begin.

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<sup>159</sup> G Bray TB 42.2 p 209

<sup>160</sup> WD Davies & DC Allison Jr, *Matthew vol 3* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1997) p 217

<sup>161</sup> MD Hooker, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (London: A&C Black 1991) p 281

<sup>162</sup> IH Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1978) p 736

<sup>163</sup> *CNTC* vol 3 pp26-27

**James 3:9** In the context of some teaching concerning the use of the tongue, the author makes this statement:

With it we bless the Lord and father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. (James 3:9&10)

Many modern commentators see these verses as set in the context of the church's life as a body, particularly as a worshipping body. Ralph Martin, having examined the language of blessing in both the Jewish background to the early Christian church and the use of this language in the New Testament, comes to the following conclusion:

What seems more likely – in the light of the use of a liturgical blessing in vv 9,10 – is that the use (and misuse) of the tongue is related primarily to the worship setting of the church as a body. If this is true, it makes what follows even more blameworthy. From one side of the worshipper's mouth comes praise to God; from the other side of the same mouth comes curses aimed at a fellow worshipper.<sup>164</sup>

There is little doubt that the author has in mind the creation account, as in the previous verse (Jas 3:7) he has alluded to the idea of the dominion of human beings over the rest of the animal world.<sup>165</sup> The use of the more unusual word, “likeness”, is to stress the importance of what is being said and the seriousness of the action being described. So, Sophie Laws says:

The probability is that he [the author] deliberately uses the more unusual of the two words in Gen.i.26 to make a specific allusion to that passage (a technique he employs in i.10 and v.4), and so to add force to his argument. The man who uses his tongue to bless God and curse men is not only using it inconsistently, but is acting

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<sup>164</sup> RP Martin, *James* (Waco: Word Books 1998) p 118

<sup>165</sup> see D Moo, *The letter of James* (Leicester: Apollos 2000) p 163



against the work of God in creating man by thus taking a diametrically opposed attitude to God and to him whom scripture presents as God's *likeness*.<sup>166</sup>

Although these verses seem to be written primarily for a church context, the author's language does not allow for any interpretation that restricts it to believers, those who are "restored" in some way. Elsewhere in the letter he has consistently addressed the recipients as brother and sisters (αδελφος/οι is used about 15 times). In 3:9, however, the author uses ανθρωπος, a more generic term that usually includes some (or all) classes of person. The problem identified by James is not simply some internecine church problem but a pervasive attitude towards other people both within and outside of the church.

In the light of these brief observations on James 3:9 some implications concerning the *imago* can be suggested. First, it is clear that for the writer of James the image of God remains in humankind after the Fall. The image of God is part of what it means to be a human being. Secondly this image is, at the very least, marred. The author is pointing to something that has gone wrong. Human beings, by their speech, are denying the value of those who are made in the image of God. Worse still, as Sophie Laws points out, their speech and action do not just impact their fellow human beings, but are in direct conflict with the intention of God. A third implication is that the outworking of the marred image is relational. The network of relationships involved in humankind being the image of God is disrupted as a result of the distortion of this image. Finally, there is a sense in James 3 that this is not how things should be, as verse 10 makes explicit: "brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so." Behind the author's word lies the thought that things can be different. The difference is seen in the Pauline corpus in terms of renewal or restoration of the image in

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<sup>166</sup> S Laws, *A Commentary on The Epistle of James* (London: A&C Black 1980) p 156

Christ. Before investigating this Christological link further, one other text needs to be examined as a direct reference to the image of God in humanity.

**1 Corinthians 11:7** As with the text from the letter of James, the context of Paul's comment on the image of God is focussed on the meeting and conduct of the Church. The basic argument of the immediate context (11:2-16) is concerned with maintaining appropriate gender distinction when the Church gathers for worship. As part of this argument, Paul says:

For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. (1Cor 11:7 RSV)

In dealing with the issue of what is and is not appropriate in the Christian assembly for men and women, 1 Cor 11:7 reinforces the conclusion that Paul has reached in the previous two verses: "that women should cover their heads in worship (or at least when they pray or prophesy)." And his thinking is "developed especially in the light of creation (as expressed primarily in Gen 1:26-27 and Gen 2:18-23)."<sup>167</sup> His design in v7 is to show why the distinction between men and women in the question of head-covering should be upheld.

Paul expresses the issue in terms of "glory", and this is closely linked to the concept of the image of God in Paul's thinking (see Rom 1:23, 2 Cor 3:18 and 4:4). He has already exhorted his readers, "whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31 RSV), and this continues to be the background for the next section of the letter. Those commentators who have seen 1 Cor 11:7 as a denial of women being in the image of God<sup>168</sup> fail to read this verse in its wider context. Later in the letter Paul makes clear that all of humanity has

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<sup>167</sup> RE Ciampa & BS Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Leicester: Apollos 2010) p 522

<sup>168</sup> U Schelle, *The Human Condition* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1996) p 101 suggests something like this in his interpretation of 1Cor 11:7

the same origin and bears the same image. “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we also bear the image of the man of heaven”. (1 Cor 15:49)

Ciampa and Rosner’s comment is apposite:

Understanding 11:7 in the light of 15:49 suggests that for Paul Adam was created directly in the image of God and that the rest of us (from Eve on) are made in God’s image as we inherit it from Adam and our parents (cf. Gen 5:3; 9:6). Adam and Eve were created in different manners, and neither of them was created in the manner of the rest of humanity (through a mother and a father). The rest of humanity however, was to come about through God working through both a mother and a father.<sup>169</sup>

The glory expressed or reflected by both man and woman is related to the manner of their creation. Paul “understands Adam to have been uniquely made in God’s image (without any human contribution), while God’s image was passed to Eve through Adam.”<sup>170</sup>

CK Barrett approaches the text in a similar fashion and sees the glory reflected in Adam as “the direct product of God’s own creative activity,” and the woman as “. . . the glory of man, deriving her being from man (though not man but God is her creator).”<sup>171</sup> Anthony Thiselton notes that the emphasis is not on the image of God *per se*, but on the need in Paul’s mind not to blur gender distinctions in the Church. He points to a grammatical feature often overlooked by commentators and translators that maintained that distinction.

...it is essential to signal Paul’s explicit use of the contrastive *μεν* and *δε*: we render **a man for his part . . . Woman on the other hand . . .** The allusion, which follows, to the sequence of creation moves from Gen 1:26-28 to Gen 2:18-25 . . . It would be

<sup>169</sup> RE Ciampa & BS Rosner, *Corinthians* p 524

<sup>170</sup> *ibid*

<sup>171</sup> CK Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: A&C Black 1971) pp 252-253

impossible for a man (or a woman) to glory *in the otherness of the other* if gender differentiation were reduced so that “the other” became “the same”. . .<sup>172</sup>

Although 1 Cor 11:7 is one of only two direct references to the image of God in humanity, it is not the main focus of his attention in this verse.

Paul’s ultimate point seems to be that nothing should happen in worship that would detract from God’s glory, including behaviour that would draw attention to the glory of man. Hooker points out that the woman’s head should be covered “not because she is in the presence of man, but because she is in the presence of God and his angels – and in their presence the glory of man must be hidden.”<sup>173</sup>

While not the direct concern of Paul in this verse, his use of the image of God does, at least, support some of the observations made above regarding James 3:9. It is clear, that in Paul’s mind, the image was not lost at the Fall, otherwise his argument here would be irrelevant to his Corinthian readers. Also, there is an implied web of relationships in his argument, relationship between God and humanity and between human beings themselves.<sup>174</sup>

In Gerald Bray’s survey of the New Testament references to the image of God, he indentifies two clear passages where there is direct reference to Christ. Two elements are common to both (ie 2Cor 4:4 and Col 1:15).

In both cases, the same phrase is used: *εἷς ἐστιν* (‘who is in the image of God’) with *ἀοράτου* (invisible) added to this in Colossians. The two passages resemble each

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<sup>172</sup> AC Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2000) p 836 emphasis in the original

<sup>173</sup> RE Ciampa & BS Rosner, *Corinthians* pp 526-527

<sup>174</sup> However interpreters deal with the relationship between men and women in particular on the basis of this text, some kind of (ordered) relationship must be posited

other further, in that this expression comes immediately after a reference to Christ's saving work.<sup>175</sup>

These two texts will be examined briefly, before commenting on their significance concerning an understanding of the image of God in Pauline thinking.

**2 Cor 4:4** Paul is writing in a context where it was an obvious temptation to preachers to say what people wanted to hear. He, however, was determined to declare “an open statement of the truth” even though it was not guaranteed to elicit a positive response from his hearers. Indeed, he was prepared to state the reason for the lack of response his preaching received:

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Cor 4:4)

Murray Harris comments on the three genitives of this verse that the first probably refers to the source of illumination, “the light that comes from the gospel;” and the second is a genitive of content or an objective genitive, “the gospel contains the glory . . . [or] displays the glory.”

The final genitive in this typically Pauline concatenation of genitives, τοῦ Χριστοῦ, is possessive. It is Christ's own glory that is proclaimed in the gospel, and it is the gospel that creates illumination.<sup>176</sup>

Paul goes on to qualify the nature of Christ's glory; it is his because he is the image of God, and “[A]s God's εἰκὼν, Christ both shares and expresses God's nature.”<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> G Bray, ‘Significance of God's Image’ *TB* 42.2 p 211

<sup>176</sup> MJ Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2005) p 330

<sup>177</sup> *ibid*

Ralph Martin is prepared to state this in stronger terms: “Εἰκὼν here . . . means that Christ is not only the full representation of God, but the coming-to-expression of the nature of God . . . of who God is in himself.”<sup>178</sup> This use by Paul marks a difference between Christ and humanity that can also be seen in his letter to the Colossians.

**Col 1:15** The Greek text of this verse opens with the relative pronoun *ὃς* (rather than the “He” or “The Son” in many modern English translations), which links it to the previous verses and their sequence of pronouns.

The sequence reads as follows:

. . . giving thanks to the Father who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light [**who**] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son, in **whom** we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. **Who** is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created. . .

James Dunn, observing this sequence of relative pronouns comments that , “[T]he *ἐν ᾧ* (“in whom”) of 1:14 switched the focus from God (*ὃς*) to Christ and thus made it possible to attach the lengthy hymnic description of Christ . . . by means of a further simple *ὃς* (“who”).” This places the focus on Christ as the revealer of God and marks the divide between Christ as the image of God and humanity’s imaging God.

Theologians have long debated just what this “image of God” in which humans were created might be. But this issue is only tangentially related to the question of what it

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<sup>178</sup> RP Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Waco: Word Books 1986) p 79, see also CK Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: A&C Black 1973) pp 132-133

means for Christ to be “the image of God”. In both texts where Paul asserts this about Christ (here and in 2 Cor 4:4), the focus is on Christ’s revelation of God.<sup>179</sup>

Edward Lohse dismisses the connection with the Genesis creation narrative saying, “even though the term ‘image’ (ΕΙΚΩΝ) suggests Gen1:27, it is out of the question to interpret it as a direct reference to the biblical account of creation.”<sup>180</sup> Further he, he suggests that,

The Christian community applied the concept “image” to Christ so as to praise him as the one in whom God reveals himself. As the “image” of the invisible God, he does not belong to what was created, but stands with the creator who, in Christ, is acting upon the world and with the world.<sup>181</sup>

The term “image” is, according to Peter O’Brien, “both fundamental and ontological,” as it points to Christ, “revealing the Father on the one hand and his pre-existence on the other.”<sup>182</sup>

To return to Gerald Bray’s observation of the two elements that 2 Cor 4:4 and Col 1:15 have in common: it is clear from the brief consideration of these texts above that the phrase that they have in common, “who is the image of God”, indicates that Christ is the ultimate revealer of God. When this is harnessed to Bray’s second observation concerning the phrase’s close connection with “Christ’s saving work”, he can draw the following conclusion:

It therefore seems most probable that the phrase ‘image of God’ is meant to be understood in terms of the divine presence and power which was able to effect salvation in Christ.

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<sup>179</sup> DJ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Leicester: Apollos 20) 08 p 117

<sup>180</sup> E Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1971) p 47

<sup>181</sup> *ibid* p 48

<sup>182</sup> PT O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco: Word Books 1982) p 44

The implication common in both texts is that Christ was able to accomplish something which no other man or being could, so that ‘image of God’ becomes a phrase which sets Christ apart from us, not one which unites Him to us in Adam. We ought therefore to interpret it as a statement about Christ’s equality with the father, and not about his identity with us.<sup>183</sup>

This conclusion is not just applicable to the Pauline corpus, but to elsewhere in the New Testament. An example of this can be found, for instance, in the opening verses of the letter to the Hebrews, which say:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high. (Heb 1:1-3)

In these verses, Christ is portrayed as both revealer and redeemer, and although much more can be said of both roles from these verses, the essence of them is that in Christ is the final word from God, and the finished work of God. Harold Attridge says, “God . . . speaks through this Son not only in word, but in deed, in the entirety of the Christ-event, providing for humanity atonement for sin and an enduring covenant relationship.”<sup>184</sup> The “exact imprint” in the quotation above is a translation of the Greek term *χαρakter* and when used with “God’s very being” to assert the likeness of Christ and God it “expresses more emphatically than does *eikon*, which occurs elsewhere to refer to Christ as the ‘image of

<sup>183</sup> G Bray, ‘Significance of God’s Image’ p 211

<sup>184</sup> HW Attridge, *Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1989) p 39



God' (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15)."<sup>185</sup> As with the Pauline texts concerning Christ as the image of God, the idea of the image is juxtaposed with the statement concerning the soteric work of Christ. In similar words to Gerald Bray's conclusion concerning the Pauline texts, Peter O'Brien can say of this passage, "[B]y making purification for sins the Son accomplished something which no one else could achieve."<sup>186</sup>

The two groups of references to the image of God (the image and humanity, and Christ as the image) considered above, do not exhaust the New Testament's use of this notion. A further set of references concerned with the restoration of the image in humankind need to be examined. It is clear from James 3:9 and 1 Cor 11:7 that the image was not lost or destroyed completely by the Fall. However, James 3:9 in particular, indicates that all is not well, and this is corroborated by the way the New Testament speaks of Christ as the perfect image and the need of humanity for redemption. The significant passages are Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18 and Col 3:10.

**Rom 8:29** Having dealt with some of the elements that constitute the hope and assurance available to believers, Paul goes on to say something about the goal intended for those who believe.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. (Rom 8:28-29)

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<sup>185</sup> PT O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Leicester: Apollos 2010) p 55

<sup>186</sup> *ibid* p 59

Implicit in this passage is the idea that the image of God needs to be restored. God has taken a decision to do just that, conformity to the image of the Son being the final stage in Paul's *ordo salutis*. CEB Cranfield comments that behind the words "conformed to the image of his son" probably lies

. . . the thought of man's creation κατ' εἰκονα θεοῦ (Gen1:27) and also the thought . . . of Christ being eternally the very εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ. The believer's final glorification is their full conformity to the εἰκὼν of Christ glorified; but it is probable . . . that Paul is here thinking not only of their final glorification but also their growing conformity to Christ here and now in suffering and obedience.<sup>187</sup>

The "large family" of Rom 8:29 is a paraphrase of πολλοὺς ἀδελφοὺς and, according to Thomas Schreiner:

The use of the word "many" (πολλοὺς *pollois*) signals the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant, which "all nations" were blessed in Abraham (Gen12:3). In the OT Israel was God's firstborn (Exod. 4:22), but now we see that Jesus Christ is God's firstborn, and one becomes part of God's family through union with him.<sup>188</sup>

Although this passage does not define what has happened to the image in humanity, it does make clear the need for restoration and that restoration involves an entering into a familial relationship with God through Christ.

**2 Cor 3:18** Paul has been addressing the issue of the rejection of the gospel by Israel and he has asserted that only Christ can take away the "veil" that prevents people's minds from

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<sup>187</sup> CEB Cranfield, *Romans vol1* (Edinburgh:T&T Clark 1975p 432. James Dunn does not deny that a process is involved but thinks the emphasis should be on "the end result of the process." *Romans vol 1* (Dallas: Word Books 1988) p 483

<sup>188</sup> T Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1998) pp 453-454

grasping the truth of the gospel. When that truth is grasped, then unveiling happens and a transformation begins through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:17-18)

If the question is asked, “What kind of freedom is mediated by the spirit?” Murray Harris offers a number of possibilities from the context:

. . . such a freedom to speak and act openly (. . . v.12); freedom from the veil (vv.14-16), whether the veil is spiritual ignorance concerning the truth of the new covenant or the veil of hardheartedness (vv.13-14), freedom from the old covenant (v.14) or from the law and its effects (v.6); freedom to behold God’s glory uninterruptedly (v.18) or to conform to Christ (v.18); or freedom of access into the divine presence without fear.<sup>189</sup>

If the response of the image-bearers in the Garden was to hide from the presence of God, the restoration that Paul envisages reverses this tendency; indeed it brings unparalleled access to God. “In other words...it is the recovery of the prospect that Gen 1:26 had entertained for the species which is uppermost in Paul’s mind.”<sup>190</sup> And this restoration/transformation is progressive, only coming to completion at the *eschaton*.<sup>191</sup>

<sup>189</sup> MJ Harris, *Second Corinthians* pp 312-313

<sup>190</sup> WJ Dumbrell, ‘Paul’s use of Exodus 34 in 2 Corinthians 3’, in *God Who Is Rich in Mercy*, PT O’Brien & DG Peterson eds (Homebush: Lancer 1986) p 189

<sup>191</sup> On this progression, see CK Barrett, *Second Corinthians* p 125; and SJ Hafemann, *Paul Moses and the History of Israel* (Tubingen: JCB Mohr 1995) pp 407-418, which also contains a brief discussion of Christ as the “second/last Adam.”

**Col 3:10** Paul has written about the Christian's union with Christ and has encouraged his readers to leave their "old self" behind with its "earthly" tendencies.

. . . seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourself with the new self, which is being renewed in the knowledge according to the image of its creator. (Cor 3:9-10)

The context suggests quite clearly that Paul is concerned with the change from "the old self" to "the new self", or to put it in terms of earlier letters, from being "in Adam" to being "in Christ" (1Cor 15 and Rom 5).<sup>192</sup> As Douglas Moo expresses it, "[I]t is therefore our Adamic identification with our servitude to sin that we have put off in coming to Christ; and it is our 'Christic' identification, with its power over sin, that we have 'put on'."<sup>193</sup> These terms "old and new self" have further significance in that they apply in both an individual and a corporate sense. As Peter O'Brien explains:

On the one hand, it has an individual reference, designating the new nature which the Colossians had put on and which was continually being renewed . . . in accordance with the Creator's image . . . On the other hand, the expression, "the new man," has a corporate reference designating the new humanity in Christ. Just as the "old man" is what they once were "in Adam," the embodiment of the unregenerate humanity, so the "new man" is what they now are "in Christ," the embodiment of the new humanity.<sup>194</sup>

This "corporate recreation of humanity in the Creator's image,"<sup>195</sup> implies not only a renewed relationship with God, but also a renewed web of interpersonal relationships. For James Dunn, this means that ". . . 'image' is a dynamic concept . . . it does not imply a static

<sup>192</sup> I am aware of the debate over the authenticity of Colossians, but am following O'Brien, *Colossians* pp xxx to liv

<sup>193</sup> D Moo, *Colossians* p 268

<sup>194</sup> PT O'Brien, *Colossians* pp 190-191

<sup>195</sup> *ibid* p 191

status but a relationship, one in which the 'image', to remain "fresh" . . . must continue in contact with the one whose image it is . . . ”<sup>196</sup>

Although not every New Testament passage which might have implications for the doctrine of the image of God has been investigated in this brief survey, some of the most significant texts have been examined and some conclusions can now be drawn. They may be summarised as follows:

1. It is clear that the image has not been completely lost or destroyed in humanity. Although in some way it has been perverted or is defective, it is open to the possibility of restoration.
2. This restoration can only happen in Christ, who is the perfect image of God and in whose likeness humanity can be "rebuilt".
3. The restoration envisaged, by Paul in particular, is progressive ("from one degree . . . to another" 2 Cor 3:8). This progression can also be expressed in terms of a common New Testament emphasis – the "now and not yet". What was provisional or preparatory in the Eden narrative, where obedience in the relationship with God was to be a determining factor (as in the command of Gen 2:16-17), will be seen in its perfection at the *eschaton*.
- 4 The New Testament statements concerning the image of God have relational implications in both "vertical" and "horizontal" directions. The question is never whether relationships to God and other human beings exist, but what kind of relationships they are: ones of disharmony or harmony, of judgement or salvation.

If, then, one is to attempt to "facilitate an interdisciplinary conversation between theologians, ethicists and biblical scholars on the *imago Dei*,"<sup>197</sup> the full testimony of the

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<sup>196</sup> J Dunn, *Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1996) p 222

<sup>197</sup> R Middleton, *Liberating Image* p 10

canon should be heard. And, as the evidence outlined above suggests, the New Testament has something to say in that conversation.

### **John Calvin and the *Imago***

A problem faces any investigation of Calvin's understanding of the *imago*, that is, where to start the investigation. It can begin from an examination of the biblical texts that speak directly or indirectly on the topic and the appropriate material from Calvin that relates to these texts (eg commentaries and sermons). Alternatively, one can trace the theme through his works chronologically. This has the advantage of detecting any development or change in Calvin's views. Or, one could take the last edition of the *Institutes* as a final summary of his view and formulate a statement of his doctrine based upon it. A caveat has already been entered against this latter course of action in chapter 1 of this study.

A recent major survey of the doctrine of the image of God, written by Jason Van Vliet, has sought to combine the first two methods to understand Calvin's view. He also uses as a framework for his approach what he describes as "the tried-and-true triad of creation, fall, and redemption."<sup>198</sup> The first two chapters of the book set the scene by raising a number of issues concerning the understanding of Calvin in contemporary scholarship and by sketching the way the doctrine has been formulated in the "Ancient and Medieval Church" (chapter 2). Van Vliet then proceeds to a chronological survey of Calvin's writings, highlighting his concept of the *imago* at different stages of his career and in the light of the changing contexts and conflicts of his work. This major chapter is divided into three sections covering 1534-1542, when mainly didactic works were produced; 1543-1558, years

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<sup>198</sup> J Van Vliet, *Children of God*: (Gottingen Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht 2009) p 35

filled with commentary writing and sermons; 1559-1564, which saw the production of the final edition of the *Institutes* and Sermons on Genesis. This chapter also contains a “Thematic Overview” bringing evidence of Calvin’s view of the *imago* together under the creation-fall-redemption schema. Such a schema is not the imposition of an alien method on Calvin; he may not articulate it in this form, but he does work within it. Evidence for this can be found in his commentary on Rom 5:12, for example:

If the purpose of Christ’s coming was to redeem us from the calamity into which Adam had fallen, and taken all his posterity headlong with him, a clearer realization of what we possess in Christ can come only when we have been shown what we have lost in Adam.<sup>199</sup>

This is contrary to the view of TF Torrance who argues there is a Christological basis to the “Argument” of Calvin’s commentary on Genesis where he says: “we must not commence with the elements of this world, but with the Gospel, which sets Christ alone before us with his cross, and holds us to this one point.”<sup>200</sup> Taking these words in context, however, produces a different reading of Calvin’s thought. He has already asserted that the creation does reveal enough for people to acknowledge God; it renders humankind “inexcusable” before him. Further only through scripture can anyone understand “. . . these things that would otherwise escape our notice. . .” because “. . . of our dull sight.”<sup>201</sup>

Other chapters examine Calvin’s possible theological forebears, the view of his colleagues and those of his opponents. For the sake of brevity Van Vliet’s “Thematic Overview” will be followed to outline Calvin’s doctrine with just one modification: his threefold schema will be expanded to encompass creation, fall, redemption and consummation.

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<sup>199</sup> *CNTC* vol 8 p 111

<sup>200</sup> *CC* vol 1 p 64, see also TF Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man* eg pps 23-24,58,172

<sup>201</sup> *CC* vol 1 p 63

**Creation** In one of his earliest works, Calvin simply says of humankind that:

Adam, parent of us all, was created in the image of and likeness of God. That is, he was endowed with wisdom, righteousness, holiness and was so clinging by these gifts of grace to God that he could have lived forever in Him, if he had stood fast in the uprightness God had given him.<sup>202</sup>

The emphasis here is on certain qualities bestowed on human beings by God. In this and in his assertion that the image resided primarily in the soul, his views show some overlap with his forebears. He parted company with many of them, however in his insistence that “image” and “likeness” were not to be widely differentiated. Having briefly examined the view of Augustine, he says that “. . . the image of God ought to rest on a firmer basis than such subtleness.” And he denies that the image of God “. . . differs from his likeness.”<sup>203</sup> By the time he wrote these words, his understanding of the image had developed further. The study and preparation of his commentary of Genesis was, perhaps, instrumental in bringing new elements into his doctrine. Van Vliet points to the “Argument” at the beginning of the commentary, where Calvin writes:

After the world had been created, man was placed in it, as in a theatre, that he, beholding above him and beneath the wonderful works of God, might reverently adore their Author. Secondly, that all things were ordained for the use of man, that he, being under deeper obligation, might devote and dedicate himself entirely to obedience towards God. Thirdly that he was endued with understanding and reason, that being distinguished from brute animals he might meditate on a better life, and

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<sup>202</sup> *Inst* 1536 p15. cf Calvin, *Psychopannychia* in *T&T* vol 3 p 422-424 where he identifies the soul alone as the seat of the image.

<sup>203</sup> *CC* vol 1, p 93



might even tend directly towards God, whose image he bore engraven on his own person.<sup>204</sup>

In this “Argument”, Van Vliet says there are two noteworthy elements. The first is how Calvin reckons that “God has clearly set human beings as the focal point of his creative work.” Secondly, “humans are obligated to direct their admiration toward this God whose image they bear.”<sup>205</sup> Here is one of Calvin’s characteristic emphases “that the *direction* of human existence is every bit as significant as its *definition*.”<sup>206</sup> This signals a further move away from the thinking of Calvin’s humanist predecessors. This is demonstrated by THL Parker who, having quoted extensively from Pico della Mirandola concerning the creation of humankind, compares Pico with Calvin’s opening statement in his chapter on humanity in the *Institutes* (1.15). This statement, Parker says, “shows that the emphasis is going to be on man as God’s creation not on man as a being in his own right.”<sup>207</sup>

Calvin’s Genesis commentary is also beginning to broaden the definition of the *imago*:

Therefore by this word the perfection of our whole nature is designated, as it appeared when Adam was endued with a right judgement, and affections in harmony with reason, had all his senses sound and well-regulated, and truly excelled in everything good. Thus the chief seat of the Divine image was in his mind and heart, where it was eminent: yet there was no part of him in which some scintillations of it did not shine forth.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> *ibid* pp 64-65

<sup>205</sup> Van Vliet, *Children of God*, pp 92-93

<sup>206</sup> *ibid* p 93

<sup>207</sup> THL Parker, *Calvin, an Introduction to his Thought* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1995) p 40

<sup>208</sup> CC vol 1, pp 94-95

The language used here, such as “harmony” and “well-regulated”, indicates for Van Vliet that humanity does not simply reflect “certain divine attributes” because of being in the image of God, but also possesses “those qualities in a unified and integrated manner. *Imago Dei* contains *integritas definita*.”<sup>209</sup> It is clear that Calvin is somewhat dismissive of Chrysostom’s “exposition”, which focuses on the dominion given to humanity that they might “in a certain sense, act as God’s vicegerent in the government of the world.” According to Calvin, “[T]his truly is some portion, though very small, of the image of God.”<sup>210</sup>

When Calvin comes to comment on Gen 5:1-3, he introduces a new element into his understanding of the *imago*; that is the idea of a filial relationship between God and humanity. Concerning Gen 5:1 he says:

It was already a great thing, that the principal place among the creatures was given to man; but it is a nobility far more exalted, that he should bear resemblance to his Creator as a son does to his father.”<sup>211</sup>

From this point on, Van Vliet suggests that “Calvin is inclined to use this father-child likeness to understand the created relationship between God and his first children, Adam and Eve.”<sup>212</sup>

This emphasis on the filial relationship between God and humanity can be seen in Calvin’s commentary of the Acts of the Apostles, published in the same year as the Genesis commentary, 1554. In his comment on Acts 17:28 where Paul has quoted “some of your own poets” (RSV), Calvin makes this observation:

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<sup>209</sup> Von Vliet, *Children of God* p 93

<sup>210</sup> CC vol 1 p 94

<sup>211</sup> *ibid* pp 227-228

<sup>212</sup> Von Vliet, *Children of God* p 95

Aratus imagined that some particle of divinity is in the minds of men in the way that the Manichees fashioned souls out of something transferred from God. . . . But this fiction should not have prevented Paul from maintaining the true principle, corrupted though it was by men's fables, that men all are *the off-spring of God* because they reproduce something divine in the superiority of their nature. This is what Scripture teaches, that we are created in the image and likeness of God. . . . All mortal men, without distinction are called 'sons', because they resemble God in mind and intelligence.<sup>213</sup>

He is ready to acknowledge that his image is "almost obliterated in them so that scarcely the faint outlines of it appear," and only being "endowed with the Spirit of adoption" will remedy the situation. None the less, the filial concept of the image of God is one that continues to guide his understanding and interpretation of the *imago*. Although, the original creation of humanity seems to have been left behind and discussion moved on to post-lapsarian texts, in all of these Calvin is looking back to the original creation (before the Fall) and sees this filial relationship rooted in the creation of humanity in the image of God. Calvin's sermons on the Book of Job were published soon after the Acts commentary and they, too, underscore the link between the filial relationship and the image of God. Van Vliet cites a number of texts where this link is made, including Job 1:6, 4:20-5:2 and 38:7. This latter text is commented on by Calvin as follows:

Behold how the angels are surely the children of God: but yet are we called so as well as they. Why so? Because God created us after his own image and likeness. And although this were defaced by the sin of Adam: yet it was repaired again in the

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<sup>213</sup> *CNTC*, vol 7 p 121

chosen by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the lively image of God, and we were so exalted by his Spirit, as we are now set in our former state again.<sup>214</sup>

The sermons on Job are a valuable source for understanding Calvin on the *imago* not only for the father-child relationship but also for the denial of the fact that the *imago* means that human beings share in the divine essence. They also contain clear statements that refute any charge of Platonism on the part of Calvin. His statement that likens a human being to a “five-foot worm”<sup>215</sup> has to be held in tension with his description of the human body in his sermon on Job10:7-15, “[B]ut man is [God’s] principle work, and the excellentest of all his creatures . . . wherein we see so many wonderful things, as a man must needs be astonished at them.”<sup>216</sup>

Let us consider a little what manner of workmanship there is in man’s skin... you see our nails are as it were superfluous to our bodies and yet notwithstanding they serve to arm our fingers that they may be put to work . . . Therefore it is certain that a man’s nails which are but a superfluity are a looking glass of God’s providence to us, so as in the same way we may perceive that he has wrought in such wise in us, as it is impossible for us to know the hundredth part of the workmanship he has put in us.<sup>217</sup>

In one of his last great works, the sermons on Genesis, Calvin states his mature thinking on the *imago* as a father-children relationship. The sermon of Gen1:26-28 contains the following statements:

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<sup>214</sup> J Calvin, *Sermons on Job*, trans by Arthur Golding 1574 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1993) p 696. Golding’s spelling has been updated.

<sup>215</sup> *Inst* p 56 (1.5.4). The section in which this phrase occurs undermines any completely pessimistic view of humanity because Calvin extols “such exquisite workmanship in their individual members”.

<sup>216</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Job* p 180

<sup>217</sup> *ibid* p 183

In the order that Moses presents here, we see that before our father Adam was created, God had already shown that he wanted to be his Father and the Father of all his lineage by exalting him above all creatures . . . just as a father does not wait until his child has been born, but when the term approaches, and his wife is to give birth, he will provide what the child requires . . . Thus God did not wait for man to be created to give him food and clothing, but he first filled the earth with good things and riches. . . God wanted to make us sense his paternal care before humankind was created.<sup>218</sup>

But when it is said here that man is to be created in the image of God, after his likeness, it is to declare that there are to be in him such powers and gifts that they serve as signs and imprints to show that the human race is like God's lineage, as Paul proves with the Gentile poet's saying in the seventeenth chapter of Acts: For we are his offspring' (Acts 17:28).<sup>219</sup> ...he [God] wanted everything that pertains to human usefulness to be fully prepared beforehand, as a father of a family.<sup>220</sup>

During the same year that Calvin was preaching on Genesis 1 he published what proved to be the final edition of the *Institutes*. In this edition, there is no mention of the Father-children relationship in connection with the image of God. To answer the question of why this was omitted Van Vliet offers three possible reasons. The first is that when preaching on Job and Genesis in particular, "with many fathers, mothers and children before him, it was a natural and fitting occasion to expound upon the image of God in terms of the filial

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<sup>218</sup> J Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis 1-11* trans RR McGregor ( Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 2009) pp 89-90

<sup>219</sup> *ibid* p 93

<sup>220</sup> *ibid* p 104

relationship.”<sup>221</sup> A second reason is that in the *Institutes* he is engaging in controversy, especially with the writings of Osiander. Finally, an honest portrayal of Calvin must allow for the fact that Calvin was fallible: “this man – who was often overtaxed with a heavy burden of work and under the weather with various bodily ailments – did not manage to maintain perfect cohesion and consistency in all his writings.”<sup>222</sup>

Through this filial image Calvin developed his concept of the image of God in a clearly relational direction. Another strand of his thought also follows this path, that is his view that humanity as made to respond to God. That response is seen in his writings in terms of obedience and worship in particular. As has been seen already, Calvin made clear that humanity, because of its position in creation, is “under deeper obligation, [to] devote and dedicate himself entirely to obedience toward God.”<sup>223</sup> In his sermon on Gen1:26-28, Calvin says that Moses is teaching about the image, “so we will be able to glorify God often for imprinting his marks in us and wanting us to be his children”.<sup>224</sup> In the light of this, it is difficult to see how TF Torrance can justify his rather sweeping statement: “[T]here is no doubt Calvin always thinks of the imago in terms of a *mirror*.”<sup>225</sup> This simply ignores much of what Calvin says; as Henri Blocher observes, it means that, “discounting the numerous statements about the image of God ‘engraved’. . . in the soul as negligible metaphors smacks of *petito principia*.”<sup>226</sup> Without denying Calvin’s use of this metaphor, it sometimes serves a specific purpose in his thinking as in his sermon on Gen 1:26-28. Here according to Van Vliet, a distinction can be made “between Christ and Adam.” That is “where Christ radiates God’s glory fully, and as it were face to face. Adam only reflects the divine majesty

<sup>221</sup> Van Vliet, *Children of God* p 119

<sup>222</sup> *ibid*

<sup>223</sup> see p 54 above for full quotation

<sup>224</sup> J Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis* p 98

<sup>225</sup> TF Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth 1949) p 36

<sup>226</sup> H Blocher, ‘Calvin’s Theological Anthropology’ in *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology* SW Chung ed (Milton Keynes: Paternoster 2009) p 72

as in a mirror.”<sup>227</sup> Further elements of Calvin’s view of the *imago*, such as his firm assertion that both men and women are made in the image of God,<sup>228</sup> and his denial that the image of God in humanity is after the *Christus incarnandus* (and therefore, his implicit assertion that it is after the triune God),<sup>229</sup> could be added to complete the picture of Calvin’s understanding of the image of God at creation. Enough has been said, however, to show the main elements of his thought.

**Fall** Once again Van Vliet detects a development in Calvin’s way of expressing his thinking concerning the *imago*. Acknowledging that in his earlier writings the image of God was “cancelled and effaced,”<sup>230</sup> Van Vliet suggests that:

Although Calvin remained emphatic about the devastating effects of the fall, he did qualify his language over time. The immediate cause for this change appears to be his exegesis of various scriptural texts such as Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 which, at face value, assume the ongoing existence of the image of God even in the fallen state.<sup>231</sup>

In his later writings this continued existence of the image is clearly, but cautiously, acknowledged. So, in the last edition of the *Institutes* he says it is “subsequently so vitiated and almost blotted out that nothing remains after the ruin except what is confused mutilated and disease-ridden.”<sup>232</sup> Similarly in expounding Job 14:13-15 Calvin says:

True it is, that when we come into this world, we bring some remnant of God’s image wherein Adam was created: howbeit the same image is so disfigured, as we be

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<sup>227</sup> Van Vliet, *Children of God* p 108. For how Calvin would have viewed mirrors in his context especially their less than “picture-perfect reflection”, see *ibid* pp 108-9.

<sup>228</sup> See eg *Sermons on Genesis* p 100 and *Inst* p 190 (1.15.4)

<sup>229</sup> See eg *Sermons on Genesis* p 92 and *Inst* p 188 (1.15.3)

<sup>230</sup> *Inst* 1536, p 16

<sup>231</sup> Van Vliet, *Children of God* p121

<sup>232</sup> *Inst* p 190 (1.15.4)

full of unrighteousness, and there is nothing but blindness and ignorance in our mind.<sup>233</sup>

It may be that this development can be attributed to Calvin's need to avoid two pitfalls, according to Jason Van Vliet. The first is to show how deep and radical are the effects of the Fall, "thereby closing the door to synergism." The second pitfall is to avoid the charge of "fatalistic determinism" by an acknowledgement of a remnant of the image in humanity.<sup>234</sup>

One of the places where Calvin gives a more detailed description of the image in humankind is in his comments on Ps 8:5. Here he says of them, that they were,

. . . formed after the image of God and created to the hope of a blessed and immortal life. Moreover man is provided with reason by which he can distinguish between good and evil and the seed of religion which is planted in him. People can communicate with each other by certain sacred bonds. Respect and shame are found in people, and they are restrained by laws. All these are certainly no obscure signs of the highest and heavenly wisdom.<sup>235</sup>

Calvin makes it clear, later in his exposition that he considers David to be speaking primarily of the "unfallen state" of humanity. But, "it is not altogether extinguished" after the Fall, although only a "small portion" remains. There is, at the very least, some sense of morality, the *sensus divinitatis*<sup>236</sup> and a capacity for relationships, despite the distorting effect of sin. Herman Selderhuis observes that:

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<sup>233</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Job* p 259

<sup>234</sup> J Van Vliet, *Children of God* p 122

<sup>235</sup> HJ Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2007) p 76, his translation of Calvin's comment

<sup>236</sup> Space forbids a consideration of the relationship of the *sensus divinitatis* to the *imago*; however, the emphasis on the relational aspect of the image provides a fruitful link between the two ideas. Created for relationship involves being created with an awareness of the other, both human and divine.



Calvin's estimation of fallen man . . . depends on the specific relation of the individual. When it concerns the relation with God, then the image is only negative; but when the relationship between man and creation is in view, the retained characteristics of humanity are emphasized.<sup>237</sup>

The Fall so defaces the image of God in humanity that the web of relationships into which they were created (God, other human beings and the world) break down.<sup>238</sup>

**Redemption** In his "Last Will and Testament" Calvin records these words:

. . . having no other hope or refuge except in his gratuitous adoption, upon which all my salvation is founded; embracing the grace which he has given me in our Lord Jesus Christ, and accepting the merits of his death and passion, in order that by this means all my sins may be buried; and praying him so to wash and cleanse me by the blood of this great redeemer, which has been shed for us poor sinners, that I may appear before his face, bearing as it were his image.<sup>239</sup>

With these words, Calvin acknowledges the past work of Christ, the present effects of grace and adoption and the future hope of transformation, that is, the final restoration of the image of God. There is, in Calvin's view, both the need and the possibility of restoration, of regeneration. As he says in his commentary on John 1:5:

. . . there are two distinct powers which belong to the Son of God: the first which is manifested in the structure of the world and the order of nature; and the second by which he restores and renews fallen nature. As he is the eternal *Speech* of God, by him the world was made. . .<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> *ibid* p 80

<sup>238</sup> See eg Calvin's comment on Gen 3:22 CC vol 1 p 184 and Gen 9:6 *ibid* pp 295-296.

<sup>239</sup> *T&T*, vol 7 p 366

<sup>240</sup> CC vol 17 p 34

Having spoken of the gifts that have been given to humanity, he says that even though rebellion has spoiled these gifts they are not entirely destroyed and, “it remains that a new office be undertaken by the Son of God, the office of Mediator, to renew by the Spirit of regeneration, man who had been ruined.”<sup>241</sup>

Christ, who is the “lively and express image of God,”<sup>242</sup> is not only the agent of redemption but of restoration, that is, “the work of Christ consists of more than satisfying the justice of God and obtaining forgiveness for sinners.”<sup>243</sup> Writing of the centrality of Christ in this connection, J Faber says,

He is the subject of the *reformatio imaginis*: Christ reforms us. At the same time He is the image into which we are changed. The image of God is also in the re-creation the *imago Christi*. Calvin speaks not only of Christ reforming us after the image of God, but writes in the same context that He is the most perfect image of God, to which we are conformed, and after which we are renewed.<sup>244</sup>

Ample evidence is available to justify this claim from Calvin’s commentaries on Rom 8:29,<sup>245</sup> 2 Cor 3:18<sup>246</sup> & Col 3:10<sup>247</sup>. In each of these comments the notion of progression is present: a progress or growth in image-bearing.

Preaching on Eph 4:23-26, Calvin says, “that God cannot acknowledge us as his children until his image is restored in us, which is done by this new creation.”<sup>248</sup> Similar statements

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<sup>241</sup> *ibid*

<sup>242</sup> CC vol 1 p 63

<sup>243</sup> Van Vliet, *Children* p 123

<sup>244</sup> J Faber, *Essays in Reformed Doctrine* (Neerlandia: Inheritance 1990) p 268

<sup>245</sup> CNTC vol 8 p181

<sup>246</sup> CNTC vol 10 pp 49-50

<sup>247</sup> CNTC vol 11 pp 349-350

<sup>248</sup> *Sermons on Ephesians*, p 436

can be seen in his sermons on Job.<sup>249</sup> And in the *Institutes* there is a comment that encompasses many aspects of this renewal:

Once they [believers] are by knowledge of the Gospel and illumination of the Holy Spirit, called into the fellowship of Christ, eternal life begins in them. Now that God has begun a good work in them, it must also be made perfect until the Day of the Lord Jesus [Phil 1:6]. It is, however, made perfect when, resembling their Heavenly Father in righteousness and holiness, they prove themselves sons true to their nature.<sup>250</sup>

For Calvin, vital elements of the renewal and restoration of the image of God are by means of the Gospel, through the work of the Spirit, which issues in a new life in conformity to God's pattern and in fellowship with other believers, and culminates in the perfection and completion of the filial relationship portrayed in the *imago*.

**Consummation** As can already be seen from some of the quotations from Calvin above, the restoration of the image has an eschatological dimension. This is clearly stated in a passage in the *Institutes* to which reference has already been made:

Now God's image is the perfect excellence of human nature which shone in Adam before his defection, but was subsequently so vitiated and almost blotted out that nothing remains after the ruin except what is confused, mutilated and disease-ridden. Therefore in some part it now is manifest in the elect, in so far as they have been reborn in the spirit; but it will attain its full splendour in heaven.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> See eg *Sermons on Job* 1:6-8, 14:16-22 and 42:9-17

<sup>250</sup> *Inst* p 822 (3.18.1)

<sup>251</sup> *Inst* p 190 (1.15.4)

Complete restoration is not, according to Calvin, for this life; here there can only be progress (albeit slow at times), fulfilment remains in the future.<sup>252</sup> That future is release from all the corruption of this world and a complete “reformation”, re-formed in the image of God. So, in his sermon of Job 3:20-26, he says:

. . . we must not be provoked to wish for death, because we be subject some to sickness, some to poverty, some to one thing, and some to another: but because we be not fully reformed to the image of God, and because we have many imperfections in us. . . Mark well the cause that must spur and provoke us to desire death: namely . . . we may be fully reformed to the image of God, so as he may reign in us.<sup>253</sup>

Calvin is not content to speak only of the “now”, but to look for the “not yet”, the outworking of God’s purpose in creation “that the image of God in holiness and righteousness is reborn in us on the condition of our sharing in eternal life and glory, so far as is necessary for complete blessedness.”<sup>254</sup>

In his discussion of the image of God, James McKeown argues that it should not be connected directly to the idea of moral perfection. The connection “arises out of theological reflection on Genesis and is not mentioned in the book itself, which does not limit the idea of the image of God to moral perfection alone.” Rather, he suggests that the image of God “is related to the ontological relationship between God and humanity that renders them on the same wavelength and makes them compatible beings.”<sup>255</sup> To be “on the same wavelength” is to be able to communicate, and to be “compatible beings” there must be some “likeness”. The examination of contemporary theological thinking, alongside the

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<sup>252</sup> see eg *CNTC* 8 p 166 (Rom 8:11)

<sup>253</sup> *Sermons on Job* p 59

<sup>254</sup> *CNTC* vol 12 p 331

<sup>255</sup> McKeown, *Genesis* p283

investigation of Calvin's views, undertaken in this and the previous chapter, legitimates viewing that "compatibility" as the *imago Dei*, and the wavelength or channel of communication as speech. Within the design plan of God, the *imago* is the context for communication.

## Chapter 4

### God – Identity and the role of testimony

If the relational element of the *Imago Dei* cannot be relegated to an outmoded or illegitimate hermeneutical approach to the scriptural data, it follows that it is part of the design plan of God in creation according to the biblical witness. One aspect of this design plan is to enable relationship, and relationship is achieved through communication. These two things, communication and relationship, are fundamental to humanity's creation in the image of God, as has been argued in the last chapter. Some perspectives on communication in particular are taken up in the present chapter that will highlight some important features of it, namely; the personal element undergirding it, the way it accomplishes things, the importance of testimony (either by the speaker or by others about the original speech) and the relational outcome that normally ensues. A return to the tradition will give this consideration an appropriate starting point.

Scripture, according to Calvin, is the means by which both communication and relationship are brought into focus, as he makes clear in his famous analogy between spectacles and Scripture in the *Institutes*.<sup>1</sup> It is the question of who God is and how he makes himself known that needs now to be addressed. Some representative statements of Calvin's view of how human beings know God are:

That brightness which is borne in upon the eyes of all men both in heaven and on earth is more than enough to withdraw all support from men's ingratitude. . .

Despite this, it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright

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<sup>1</sup> *Inst*, p 70 (1.6.1)

to the very Creator of the universe. It was not in vain, then, that he added the light of his Word *by which to become known unto salvation*.<sup>2</sup>

This magnificent theater of heaven and earth, crammed with innumerable miracles, Paul calls the “wisdom of God.” Contemplating it, we ought in wisdom to have known God. But because we have profited so little by it, he call us to faith in Christ, which, because it appears foolish, the unbelievers despise.<sup>3</sup>

For even if many men once boasted that they worshipped the Supreme Majesty, the Maker of heaven and earth, yet because they had no Mediator it was not possible for them truly to taste God’s mercy, and thus be persuaded that he was their Father. Accordingly, because they did not hold Christ as their Head, they possessed only a fleeting knowledge of God.<sup>4</sup>

While Calvin clearly acknowledged that God is first the Creator and then the Redeemer, he has to be known as Redeemer before he can truly be known as Creator. What is apparent in Calvin’s approach to humankind’s knowledge of God is also recognized in the historical experience of Israel as recorded in Scripture. The essential, foundational moment in Israel’s experience of God is the Exodus. This is where, according to the narrative, they become the people of God, a redeemed people in relationship with YHWH. It is this moment that gives significance to their later history and conditions their identity. The exodus becomes the paradigm for the later developments and interpretations of God’s redemptive actions on his people’s behalf in the future. Two examples may be given of the use of the Exodus paradigm in the rest of the canon, one from the former and one from the latter prophets.

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<sup>2</sup> *Inst*, pp 69-70 (1.6.1) emphasis added

<sup>3</sup> *Inst*, p 341 (2.6.1)

<sup>4</sup> *Inst*, pp 347-348 (2.6.4)

In the book of Joshua it is clear that the writer sees the entry into the Promised Land as conditioned by and an extension of the Exodus. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are redolent with Exodus allusions and imagery. The people cross the Jordan on dry ground while the *waters* are ‘piled up’ (3:14-17 cf. Ex 14:21-25). The dating of the arrival of Israel in Canaan and the first celebration of the Passover in the land is of obvious significance in the narrative (4:19-24 & 5:10-12; cf. Ex.12:1-12). The pattern of redemption established by the Exodus is the pattern worked out in the conquest of the Land. The final act of the narrative (chapter 24), the renewal of the covenant, reflects on the acts of God and the response of the people in relation to Egypt and their redemption from it.

Deutero-Isaiah speaks of the return of the exiles from captivity in a deliberate, self-conscious way that invests that return with the significance of a second Exodus. In commenting on Is 40:3-5 Brevard Childs says,

Within Second Isaiah the theme of a highway is part of a larger set of images describing the transformation of the wilderness into a garden (41:18ff, 42:15ff) in order to facilitate the return of the exiles. Equally important for the biblical imagery is the appropriation of the language of the Exodus from Egypt (11:16; 51:9ff; 52:11ff), as the two events are fused into a single all-encompassing paradigm of divine deliverance.<sup>5</sup>

These two brief examples are a small part of the greater tapestry of Israel’s experience of God’s action on their behalf as narrated in the Hebrew Scriptures. Evidence such as this leads Walter Brueggemann to say that, “the Exodus grammar of Yahweh saturates the imagination of Israel. The Exodus recital, either as a simple declarative sentence enacting

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<sup>5</sup> Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville Westminster John Knox Press 2001) p 299



Israel's primal theological grammar or as a fuller narrative, becomes paradigmatic for Israel's testimony about Yahweh.”<sup>6</sup>

This judgment can be further established by an investigation of the OT vocabulary of redemption – especially in terms of God's activity (in redeeming) or his identity (as redeemer).<sup>7</sup> Some aspects of the significance of this link between the Exodus and the idea of redemption will be explored in chapter 5 in the context of the divine name (Exodus 3 and 6).

The theological acknowledgment (following Calvin) that people in general and Israel in particular (based on the Exodus experience) know God first as Redeemer and then as Creator raises vital questions. These questions will be concerned with the canonical shaping of scripture in particular – “Why is the exodus not given the primary place in the canon? Why is precedence given to the creation narrative?” Brevard Childs makes the following observation,

From a theological perspective it is significant to note that the present canonical shape has subordinated the noetic sequence of Israel's experience of God in her redemptive history to the ontic reality of God as creator. This is to say, although Israel undoubtedly first came to know Yahweh in historical acts of redemption from Egypt, the final form of the tradition gave precedence to God's initial activity in creating the heavens and the earth.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> W Brueggemann, *OT Theology: an Introduction* (Nashville Abingdon Press 2008) p 178

<sup>7</sup> see *NIDOTTE* pp 789-794

<sup>8</sup> BS Childs *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis Fortress Press 1992) p 385

Before pursuing some of the ramifications of this observation of Childs, which is seen by Neil MacDonald to be “something of momentous importance”<sup>9</sup>, it is worth reviewing briefly the way the Exodus event has been discussed in broad terms in the Christian tradition.

Pre-critical exegesis and interpretation accepted the traditional ascription of authority of the Pentateuch to Moses. In the light of this acceptance of Mosaic authorship it was possible to say that the original audience was in fact the ‘wilderness generation of Israelites’. This is clear from Calvin’s comments, for example on Exodus 15:1.

Moses introduced this song not only in testimony of his gratitude, but also in confirmation of the history; for the song which he dictated to the Israelites was not concerning an unknown event, but he brought them forward as eyewitnesses, that all ages might know that nothing this far had been written which had not openly been declared by 600,000 men, besides their wives and children.<sup>10</sup>

This was the generation that experienced the redemption accomplished by God which established them as God’s people. Calvin, to some degree, saw the preceding narrative (chiefly the book of Genesis) as leading to this point and making clear who the redeeming God is. The following quotations from the “Argument” to his commentary of Genesis clarify this.

The intention of Moses in beginning his book with the creation of the world is to render God, as it were, visible to us in his works . . . This is the reason why the Lord, that he may invite us to the knowledge of himself, places the fabric of heaven and earth before our eyes, rendering himself, in a certain manner, manifest in them. For his eternal power and Godhead (as Paul says) are there

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<sup>9</sup> NB MacDonald, *Metaphysics and the God of Israel* (Milton Keynes Paternoster 2006) p 107

<sup>10</sup> CC vol 2 p 255

exhibited. (Rom1:20) . . . And in fact, though Moses begins, in this Book, with the creation of the World, he nevertheless does not confine us to this subject.

Whereas Moses was ordained the teacher of the Israelites there is no doubt that he had an especial reference to them, in order that they might acknowledge themselves to be a people elected and chosen by God; and that they might seek the certainty of this adoption from the Covenant which the Lord had ratified with their fathers, and might know that there was no other God, and no other right faith.<sup>11</sup>

A pre-critical exegete such as Calvin read Scripture conscious of both literary artifice and authorial intention.<sup>12</sup> This shaped his exposition of the text so that he was alert to the fact that there was much in the creation and patriarchal narratives that acted as a kind of prolegomenon to the great act of redemption by God for his people in the Exodus event. This in its turn acted as a foreshadowing of the work of Christ in the New Testament. There was in many 'pre-critical' exegetes a doctrinal presupposition that central to the whole of Scripture was a christological and soteriological emphasis.

With the rise of 'critical' study of the Bible, this kind of consensus broke down and the two testaments, the books within them and the constituent parts of those books were treated as discrete units. No longer was it possible to speak of the Bible's theology, or of an Old Testament or New Testament theology. Rather, the Old Testament was made up of a variety of sources with theologies of their own, often competing theologies. The Exodus narratives were now recognized to be composite documents with different sources being drawn together. The focus of study became more concerned with the difference between these

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<sup>11</sup> CC vol 1 pp 58, 59, 64 & 65

<sup>12</sup> see C.Greene-McCreight *Ad Literam* (New York Peter Lang 1999) for an analysis of this aspect of Calvin's Commentaries

sources and their particular emphases. Analysis, sometimes dividing a text into the minutest fragments, became the key task of the scholar, as opposed to the grand (or grandiose) synthesis of earlier generations. The quest for sources and their origins and theology often meant that the text itself, in its final edited form was disregarded as a viable object of study and interpretation.

The post-critical era was ushered in by the work of Brevard Childs in particular.<sup>13</sup> His perspective does not involve a rejection of the work of previous critical scholars (work in redaction criticism, form criticism and textual criticism, for example); rather he is concerned with the composite, completed nature of the text.

This canonical shaping, he would argue, alerts one to the presence of different narrative viewpoints – of different layers of canonical shaping superimposed on one another – concealed, as it were, within the surface of the continuous narrative . . . This seems to be the fundamental difference between Childs' canonical approach and the pre-critical tradition of interpretation one finds in Augustine, Thomas and Calvin.<sup>14</sup>

This canonical or post-critical view is not a simple return to the exegesis of pre-Enlightenment scholars – although it is, in part, a retrieval of aspects of their work and understanding – it is an attempt to deal with the final form of the scriptural text in the light of what has gone before in the work and history of biblical criticism. The significance of this post-critical stance for the Exodus narratives is that they are not approached atomistically but with the intention of discovering the way the final redactor brings the sources together as a witness to Israel's experience of YHWH's activity on their behalf.

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<sup>13</sup> see C.Seitz in *Canon & Biblical Interpretation* C Bartolomew et al (Milton Keynes: Paternoster 2006) Chap 2

<sup>14</sup> MacDonald *Metaphysics* p121&122 n.2

Wider canonical issues are taken into account and, “the final form of the text performs a crucial hermeneutical function in establishing the peculiar profile of the passage.”<sup>15</sup> So, for example, Israel’s primary experience of YHWH as redeemer at the time of the Exodus is set in the canonical context of her own prehistory and of the creation narrative.

One writer who has capitalized on this work by Brevard Childs Neil MacDonald, in his book *Metaphysics and the God of Israel* he has utilized and developed in his own way this canonical or post critical view. This approach, along with his emphasis on God acting by speaking, offers a fruitful way in to re-examine the issues and biblical texts under consideration in this and the following chapter. Concerning the creation narrative (attributed to, or edited by, P), MacDonald argues that it is paradigmatic,

That is; P understands the creation narrative as paradigmatic for the way that God acts in the world. Hence, in the cases where J has omitted – for whatever reason – to include God’s speech in the narrative (as in the climactic events of Exodus 14) – P will ensure that the narrative events are grounded in and given their meaning by divine speaking.

And this is because P clearly articulates God’s speaking as a sufficient causal power, an efficient cause in the creation narrative.<sup>16</sup> Reviewing *Metaphysics and the God of Israel*, Ernest Lucas says that MacDonald’s “theory of divine action arises from a philosophical reflection on Genesis 1 which, it seems to me, is not demanded by the text itself if it is read in its ancient Near Eastern context.”<sup>17</sup> This criticism is problematic, however, because it ignores MacDonald’s emphasis on the final form of the text (and P’s redaction of it). It also suggests that the Near Eastern context should be privileged in the interpretation of the

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<sup>15</sup> BS Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London SCM Press 1979) pp 76-77

<sup>16</sup> MacDonald *Metaphysics* p.122 n 3

<sup>17</sup> E. Lucas *EQ* LXXXX p 275

text.<sup>18</sup> Finally, it overlooks the link made between God's speaking and action in many major commentaries on Genesis.<sup>19</sup> Philosophical and theological reflections are not mutually exclusive – the one might offer explanatory or confirmatory support for the other – “philosophical reflection on Genesis 1” cannot be illegitimate *per se*. The project MacDonald undertakes is, as he puts it in another essay, “the attempt to evaluate the rationality of the noetic truth claims of the people of Israel in the context of the ontic reality of God as creator and covenant partner understood as essentially a speaking self.”<sup>20</sup>

In the light of the “momentous importance” of Childs’ observation, MacDonald’s study of the Exodus event focuses on Exodus 14. As an alternative, one among many, this study will examine the passages which are commonly connected with the “revelation of the divine name” (in chapter 5). These passages (Exodus 3:1-15 and 6:1-8 in particular) shed further light on God’s identity, speaking and acting. Before any substantiation of that claim can be attempted there are other issues that need to be considered, particularly Israel’s experience of God and her testimony to that experience.

## Experience and Testimony

The views espoused in *Metaphysics and the God of Israel* are “resolutely post-critical” according to MacDonald,<sup>21</sup> running contrary to the naturalistic assumptions of modern, critical hermeneutics. There are, he suggests, “two fundamental explanatory concepts in Old Testament narrative . . . on the one hand, YHWH’s *self-determination* and, on the other, the people of Israel’s *historical* experiences of YHWH’s speaking and acting in the world.”

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<sup>18</sup> As examined earlier in chapter 3

<sup>19</sup> See eg the commentaries of Brueggemann, Wenham and Westermann listed in the bibliography

<sup>20</sup> MacDonald, ‘Divine speaking as Godly Action in Old testament Narrative in C Bartholomew et al *Behind the Text* (Carlisle: Paternoster 2002) p 473

<sup>21</sup> MacDonald, *Metaphysics*

And he takes “the concept of divine self-determination to be the *more* fundamental concept in that it provides for the *greater* rationality of the claim to historical experience of YHWH than does the concept of historical experience on its own.”<sup>22</sup>

Without denying or minimising the fundamental nature of “YHWH’s self-determination”, attention will be given here to the idea of “experience” as a formative part of theological understanding.

Any discussion of the role of experience in theology has wider implications than simply the understanding of the Old Testament. Alister McGrath writes that “Understanding the Christian faith is first and foremost an experience, rather than the acceptance of a set of doctrines.”<sup>23</sup> For him the foundation experience is that of the first Christians and their encounter with the risen Christ. He goes on to argue that the essential purpose of Christian doctrine is to provide a framework within which the experience of the first Christians may become ours.”<sup>24</sup> The question must be asked, in what way can doctrine pass on the experience of the first Christians? Is that not to ask of doctrine more that it can deliver? The experience of the first Christians, both before and after the resurrection, must, in certain senses, be unique. It would appear that his argument is that experience is the basis of Christian doctrine and that doctrine (developed from those first experiences) is the means by which that same experience is replicated in later believers. In further discussions of many later controversies he seems to underline this point. He suggests that some doctrinal frameworks, that of the Arians for example, were not thought to be adequate to convey genuine Christian experience.<sup>25</sup> Arian views were challenged, however, not because they produced defective Christian experience, but rather because they were at variance with the

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<sup>22</sup> MacDonald, *Metaphysics* pp121 & 122

<sup>23</sup> A McGrath *Justification by Faith* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering 1988) p 129

<sup>24</sup> *ibid* p 129

<sup>25</sup> *ibid* p 130

New Testament witness. Although it is clear from the rest of McGrath's writing on this subject that he is not wishing to delineate an anthropocentric theology, at this point there are some echoes of Schleiermacher as there is a tendency for talk about God to become talk about human experience of God.<sup>26</sup>

The experience of the first Christians, however, engendered a *witness*, a *testimony* to what God in Christ had done for them and in them. This speech-act of testimony was (and is) essentially kerygmatic. What happened then, and to them, acts as testimony to the possibility of relationship with God. Their experience may not be able to be replicated in subsequent generations of believers but it does "underwrite" the same possibility of being in relationship with God. What contemporary believers receive is not the experience of the first Christians; rather it is their testimony, which is the catalyst for experience of God now. As Marcus Bockmuehl graphically says, "[U]nless at some basic level we are prepared to receive, trust and inhabit a given communal embodiment of memory and witness, we can know nothing at all. The solipsism of *cogito ergo sum* is logically compelling only in the madhouse."<sup>27</sup>

This "memory and witness" of the first Christians is of supreme importance according to Allison Trites who in his comprehensive study *The New Testament Concept of Witness* shows that the basic meaning of the term μαρτυς is the common one of "giving evidence" rather than of "suffering". Concerning the use of the term in the Synoptic gospels he says, "their testimony concerns not only the reality of the historical events which they have seen

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, pp16 & 17

<sup>27</sup> M Bockmuehl *Seeing the Word* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2006)p 206



and heard, but also a conviction as to what they signify, namely, the saving activity of God.”<sup>28</sup>

Many would doubt the capacity of experience expressed through testimony to be an appropriate source of knowledge. This has certainly been an outcome of the critical mind-set from the Enlightenment onward. David Hume, for example, combined “Descartes’ emphasis on epistemology and the first person with a rigorous empiricism,” this caused him to reject any “common sense claim to objective knowledge.” This resulted in “the consequent retreat into the confines of the first person” and it “was accompanied by no thread of reasoning that would enable him to emerge from there.”<sup>29</sup> Hume apparently allows room for testimony as a factor in acquiring knowledge but so circumscribes it that it is only valid when guaranteed by an individual’s perception of corroborative evidence. Hume explains it in this way, “[I]t will be sufficient to observe that our assurance in any argument of this kind is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the report of witnesses.”<sup>30</sup>

A contemporary of Hume, who rejected his reductionist tendencies, was Thomas Reid. Reid saw testimony as a foundational element in the acquisition of knowledge. He recognized that children in their earliest years are dependent on others for knowledge. They rely on “human testimony before we can give a reason for doing so,” which means that, “[T]his, indeed, puts our judgment almost entirely in the hands of those about us in the first period of

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<sup>28</sup> A Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977) p 198

<sup>29</sup> R Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (London: Routledge 1984) p 132

<sup>30</sup> D Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* ed T L Beauchamp (Oxford OUP 1999) p 170

life.”<sup>31</sup> He also saw the agenda of Hume as reducing “all our social affections to certain modifications of self love.”<sup>32</sup>

While acknowledging both his debt and differences to Reid, CAJ Coady provides the most comprehensive and recent study of testimony. Describing the basic thrust of his book, he says that it “is that our trust in the word of others is fundamental to the very idea of serious cognitive activity.”<sup>33</sup> He, like Reid before him, dissents from the views expressed by Hume, who considered that testimony could only be justified “in terms of individual observation”. This Coady thinks is false, “since our reliance on testimony rightly goes beyond anything that could be justified by personal observation.”<sup>34</sup> After having observed the way Hume and many in his wake have insisted on the superiority of perception over testimony, he concludes,

. . . the hankering after a primacy for perception is really a hankering after a primacy for my perceptions, or more strictly, for the individual’s own perceptions (whoever he or she might be). But why should such a claim have any appeal? Perhaps because it assumes a sort of egocentric predicament which forms one natural starting point for much traditional epistemology as well as much traditional skepticism.<sup>35</sup>

Robert Audi in his examination of testimony concludes that “testimony is a natural and pervasive source of beliefs.” Further he believes it is possible to say “that testimony-based beliefs not only constitute some of our basic knowledge but are also psychologically and existentially basic.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> T Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1969) p 640

<sup>32</sup> *ibid* p72

<sup>33</sup> *ibid* p vii

<sup>34</sup> *ibid* p 93

<sup>35</sup> Coady, *Testimony* p 148

<sup>36</sup> R Audi, *Epistemology* (London: Routledge 1998) p 198

There are two further issues that need consideration and are of significance for the present work. The first is the fact that both Reid and Coady, followed by others, consider testimony as a speech act. Thomas Reid classifies it as a “social operation of the mind” which stands alongside the act of promising. Coady also uses this idea and a natural inference of this approach is that there is an element of commitment both on the part of the speaker and of the listener. The speaker gives backing (or authority) to his or her words; the listener trusts the speaker. The act of believing testimony is not an act of gullibility; there are ways of detecting whether what is being said is false or misleading. Without this element of commitment on both sides, however, communication is impossible. Within this trajectory, from Reid to Coady, stands JL Austin, the acknowledged ‘father’ of modern speech-acts theory. He concurs with their judgment.

It seems rather, that believing in other persons, in authority and testimony, is an essential part of the act of communicating, an act which we all constantly perform. It is as much an irreducible part of our experience as say, giving promises, or playing competitive games, or even sensing coloured patches.<sup>37</sup>

This element of commitment and other aspects of speech acts will receive further discussion below.

The second consideration is that there needs to be an awareness, a consideration, a receptivity towards the other. Testimony “makes sense” in all arenas of shared understanding, of communal beliefs. So, Reid speaks of both a common understanding and shared language and Coady of a shared belief. This understanding has received backing from a number of philosophers in recent history. The desire for the independence, the

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<sup>37</sup> JL Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1961/79)p 115

autonomy, of the individual knower from Descartes to Hume and on, has received some radical questioning on recent decades. One of the fundamental problems with this view is that it has led, according to many writers, to a disintegration of any unity in human culture and human being itself (especially via the dualism it espouses). Colin Gunton has said that this has come about,

. . . by seeing the mind as a disembodied spectator, not as part of an involved person; by an excessive individualism, detaching us from each other as from the world; by making greater claims for our humanity than it can bear, tearing us from the ground of our being. In a word we have been tempted to see ourselves as the creators of meaning, even of our being.<sup>38</sup>

These two issues will be considered briefly below.

## **Speech and Action**

Before considering some of the issues concerning God's speech and action, it is worth reviewing briefly the attitudes to language that have been adopted historically. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw what has been described as "the linguistic turn in philosophy." Both the impressive progress of the scientific enterprise and the self-confidence with which it was able to describe itself; especially its precision in its use of language. There had been, for many decades, an ever growing number of scientific theories propounded, theories that were based on the observation of the researcher. These observations meant, at least in theory, that the propositions which were put forward were testable; their claims could be judged as true or false. If claims were not made purely on observational "fact", then they could still be assessed in terms of their internal logic and the analysis of the terms used. Some

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<sup>38</sup> C Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation* (Basingstoke: MMS 1985) p 153

philosophers began to consider that kind of scientific language was to be preferred over “everyday” language, because its precision meant that they were less likely to err in statements that they make. A classic expectation of the development of this view of language is to be found in the work of AJ Ayer:

The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition it purports to express – that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false. If, on the other hand, the putative proposition is of such a character that the assumption of its truth or falsehood is constituent with any assumption whatsoever concerning the nature of his future experience, then, as far as he is concerned, it is, if not tautology, a mere pseudo-proposition. The sentence expressing it may be emotionally significant to him; but it is not literally significant.<sup>39</sup>

The claim he is making here is that the “Verification Principle” will demonstrate which sentences count as meaningful and which do not. Ayer’s view is not unique to 20<sup>th</sup> century British philosophy; however it has a number of antecedents.

Ayer had spent some time in Vienna engaging in post-graduate studies in philosophy. Here he came into contact with, and was influenced by, the Vienna Circle, who, from 1907, had been meeting to discuss and formulate a scientific philosophy which would show that the issues raised by metaphysicians were pseudo-problems; indeed, they were meaningless.

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<sup>39</sup> AJ Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz 1936) p 72

These Logical Positivists, as they were called later, exercised a considerable influence on a group of philosophers in Britain. As well as Ayer, the group included Bertrand Russell and G E Moore. Ludwig Wittgenstein was also associated with this group for a time. An earlier source of influence on Ayer and his companions was the work of the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, David Hume. In particular they appropriated and refined what is sometimes referred to as “Hume’s fork”. There are according to Hume only two types of meaningful assertions: the “relation of ideas” and “matters of fact”. The first type expresses logical relationships and their truth stands or falls by the analysis of their meaning. Whereas the second type expresses empirical truths, truths which stand or fall by being tested against those things to which they refer. So certain was Hume that there were no other types of meaningful assertions that he could boldly state:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hands any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact or existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.<sup>40</sup>

It follows from this that real knowledge for Hume was limited to mathematics and the experimental sciences. Taking up Hume’s declaration above, AJ Ayer says that it is “but a rhetorical version of our own thesis that a sentence which does not express either a formally true proposition or an empirical hypothesis is devoid of literal significance,”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> D Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* p 211

<sup>41</sup> AJ Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* p 48

By the middle of the century, there was a growing band of philosophers who considered the view of the Logical Positivists to be a reductionist and impoverished one. Wittgenstein was one of the first to assert that ordinary language was not as meaningless as had been hitherto claimed. The dominant voice in Oxford was that of JL Austin, who was prepared to claim that it had been “for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to describe some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact’, which it must do either truly or falsely.”<sup>42</sup> Many statements are not simply verifiable in the way that was being demanded, yet they cannot be dismissed as “pseudo-statements”. This, so called, “descriptive fallacy” takes too narrow a view of language, marginalising much actual usage. Initially Austin divided language into two major categories, drawing a distinction between constative and performative statements. Constatives are those statements that purport to record or impart information. Performatives do not report or describe an action – they do it. Citing the words spoken at a wedding, at the naming of a ship or written in a will, Austin argues that they cannot be mere descriptions. “None of the utterances cited is either true or false, rather . . . To name a ship *is* to say (in the appropriate circumstances) the words ‘I name etc.’. When I say before the registrar or altar, etc. ‘I do’ I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it.”<sup>43</sup> The acts of promising, naming or bequeathing are expressible, not in terms of true or false, but in Austin’s terms as ‘happy’ or ‘unhappy’, that is, if the action is accomplished or if it fails in some way. Furthermore, each of these actions implies certain contexts and conventions. For the ‘happy’ functioning of a performative such as a promise, certain conditions are necessary, the person making the promise must have the ability to carry it out, it is something which must take place in the future, etc.

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<sup>42</sup> JL Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1962/75) p 1

<sup>43</sup> *ibid* p 6

At the outset of the William James lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955 and published as *How to do Things with Words*, Austin set out his discontent with current approaches to language and determined to focus on its use. In this he was part of a growing trend in philosophy the main idea of which was succinctly summed up by Ludwig Wittgenstein when he said that “The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work.”<sup>44</sup> That is, when philosophers engage in abstract or theoretical deliberations concerning language, a whole range of problems ensue. There is, in Wittgenstein’s view, no such thing as language in general, there are only the specific day-to-day uses of language and these should be the objects of investigation. It is this kind of investigation that Austin seeks to undertake and this leads him to distinguish different types of speech-act.

Although discussion of speech-act theory has become common currency in both philosophy and theology, it is worth highlighting briefly some essential elements of Austin’s approach. First, he looks at the utterance itself, at the word or sentence spoken – this he terms the locutionary act. Secondly the words spoken have a certain force, something is done by what is said (eg by promising, answering, commanding etc.) – this is the illocutionary act. Thirdly, certain consequential effects are produced in the hearers (eg they are persuaded, moved, motivated to action etc.) – this is termed the perlocutionary act.<sup>45</sup> A particularly significant aspect of Austin’s classification is his emphasis on the illocutionary act as both content and force; that is, what the utterance is being used to do. He also maintains that a speech-act implies a speech-agent and the implications concerning intentionality that this involves. As he works out his theory in the course of the lectures, Austin finds it less and

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<sup>44</sup> L Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* sec 132 (Oxford: Blackwell 1958) See further on background RS Briggs *Words in Action* (Edinburgh T & T Clark 2001) pp 32 - 38

<sup>45</sup> Austin, *How to do Things* pp 94ff



less necessary to make the distinction between constatives and performative statement. In the end he sees all usages of language as performative – the actions of “stating, describing etc, are just two names among a very great many others for illocutionary acts; they have no unique position.”<sup>46</sup>

John Searle, who completed his doctorate on “Sense and Reference” under Austin at Oxford, both develops and diverges from aspects of his mentor’s work. He explains his focus on everyday language by saying that “all linguistic communication is not, as has been generally supposed, the symbol, word or sentence . . . but rather the performance of the speech act.” In his view, “speech acts . . . are the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication.”<sup>47</sup> There are two main foci to Searle’s analysis of speech acts. The first is on the speech act itself – analysing its structure. The other is on communication – analysing the process of communication by the performance of a speech act. The analysis Searle presents differs somewhat from that of Austin: he suggests that any speech act can be seen as the performance of at least three different kinds of acts:

1. the uttering of words and sentences, which he terms **utterance acts**;
2. referring and predicating, which he terms **propositional acts**;
3. stating, questioning, promising, etc., which he terms **illocutionary acts**.

These, however, are not “separate things that speakers do . . . simultaneously, but rather in performing an illocutionary act one characteristically performs propositional acts and utterance acts.”<sup>48</sup> Alongside this threefold classification, he takes up Austin’s notion of perlocutionary acts. There is an interrelationship between the issuance of an illocutionary

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid* pp 148f

<sup>47</sup> J.Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1969) p16

<sup>48</sup> *ibid* p 24

act and its consequences or effects on the hearer. These consequences produce a change in the “actions, thoughts, beliefs etc.” of the hearer.

For example by arguing I may *persuade* or *convince* someone, by warning him I may *scare* or *alarm* him, by making a request I may *get him to do something*, by informing him I may *convince* him (*enlighten, edify, inspire* him, *get him to realise*). The italicized expressions above denote perlocutionary acts.<sup>49</sup>

Searle wishes to distinguish between the illocutionary act and its effect, which is seen in the reception of the communication; that is, the listener understands the intention of the speaker; and the perlocutionary act and its effect as he or she is persuaded, moved or motivated to act. William Alston summarises the relationship with this principle: “Perlocutionary acts may be based on illocutionary acts, but not vice versa.”<sup>50</sup> The intended effect or outcome of a speech act is dependent on successful communication. One of the principal reasons, for Searle, why communication can be successful is that “*speaking a language* is engaging in a rule governed form of behaviour.”<sup>51</sup> Among the illustrations used to explicate this are the game of chess and different human languages. In the use of the game of chess, different countries may have different conventions concerning the material form of the pieces or the board. Yet, despite the apparent difficulties there must be an underlying set of rules that allow for these individual exemplars to be called “chess” or for the game to be playable (especially in an international tournament). Although there is considerable divergence in the conventions of different languages, Searle argues that there must be some underlying rules for human language as a whole, as this allows the language to be inter-translatable. This leads to a distinction he wishes to make between *regulative* and *constitutive* rules.

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid* p 25

<sup>50</sup> W Alston, *Illocutionary Acts & Sentence Meaning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000) p 32

<sup>51</sup> J Searle, *Speech Acts* p 41

Regulative rules are those which are concerned with modifying behaviour in which people are already engaged. Constitutive rules create new patterns of behaviour, they constitute, or make possible, the form of activity they regulate,<sup>52</sup> Before there can be a game of tennis (as it is known today) the concepts of match, set, ace, net, court etc have to be ‘invented’. “In a similar way, language rules generate ‘institutions’ such as promising, contracting, commanding, declaring war, etc, where seemingly there was nothing before.”<sup>53</sup>

The notion of the illocutionary act as a primary one in speech-act theory is analysed further by both Austin<sup>54</sup> and, with greater sophistication, by Searle. A distinction can be made, they both claim, between the content of what is said and its force. Searle sums up this distinction as follows:

. . . we can represent the structure of illocutionary acts F(p), where F stands for illocutionary force and p for propositional content. That is we can separate the part of the speech act that constitutes its illocutionary type or illocutionary force from the part that constitutes its propositional content.<sup>55</sup>

Thus the statement “I promise I shall be there” may be represented as F(p); that is F [I promise] p [I shall be there]. If a more specific illocutionary force indicator is required Pr would indicate the statement in a promise. Similarly W would indicate the statement is a warning and Com a commissive, which entails making a personal commitment, each of these replacing F in the representation of the illocutionary act. There is also the further possibility of keeping the negation of propositional content distinct from the negation of illocutionary force. So, “I promise not to come” would be represented as Pr(-p) and “I do

<sup>52</sup> J Searle, *Mind Language and Society* (London: Phoenix 1999) see p 123

<sup>53</sup> N Fotion, *John Searle* (Teddington: Acumen Publishing 2000) p 23

<sup>54</sup> see Austin, *How to do Things with Words* pp 98-164

<sup>55</sup> J Searle, *Mind, Language* p 138

not promise to come” as  $\neg\text{Pr}(p)$ . This analysis of Searle’s undermines the kind of dualism that often sets description, report and proposition over against the more expressive forms of promise, entreaty and self involvement. Each of these latter-forms is a speech act that embodies a proposition. It should be noted at this point that promise as a speech act is used by most theorists as a major paradigm, and it is one that has been used extensively in theological appropriations of speech act theory.<sup>56</sup>

Another significant notion in Searle’s analysis of speech-acts is that of *direction of fit*. There is a basic difference between assertions on the one hand and promises and commands on the other. The difference lies in the direction of *fit*, which he describes as being either *words-to-world* or *world-to-words*.<sup>57</sup> In assertions the purpose of the speaker is to find words (more particularly, their propositional content) to match the world. For promises and commands, the purpose is to get the world to match the words (ie to bring about a state of affairs that matches the words). Taking up an illustration from Elizabeth Anscombe, Searle suggests the following scenario: a shopper goes into a supermarket with a shopping list that has on it words like “butter, eggs, bread, bacon etc”. These words represent the *propositional* content of the list. However, the list is far more than a locutionary act of referring – it is also an *illocutionary force* carrying with it the implicit command to undertake task of making the world of reality match the words on the list. By filling the supermarket trolley and conveying the goods home, a *words-to-world fit* is achieved. The illustration is extended by Anscombe with the introduction of a detective into the scene. The detective follows the shopper, making a list of all the goods that go into the trolley. This action is, however, the converse of what the shopper is doing. The detective’s aim is to describe the world as it is –

<sup>56</sup> See the listed works of A Thiselton, K Vanhoozer and N Wolterstorff

<sup>57</sup> J Searle, *Expression and meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979) pp 3f

words are designed to match the reality of the world. There is a *world-to-words fit*. If the detective does the job well, the two lists will be identical in *propositional content (p)*. The *illocutionary force (f)*, however, will be different; each will reflect a different direction of fit between the words and the world. Furthermore, if mistakes have been made, completely different actions will be needed to remedy the situation. If the detective has made a mistake, then to remedy the situation, it is simply a matter of erasing the wrong word and inserting the right one (eg write “bacon” instead of “pork chop”). If it is the shopper’s mistake then, to remedy the situation a further visit to the supermarket is necessary. The detective’s changes are an intra-linguistic affair, whereas for the shopper the *world-to-word* direction of fit involves *extra-linguistic* outcomes.

In Searle’s basic taxonomy of speech-acts, the first class, assertives, have a words-to-world fit, as the purpose of these “is to commit the speaker . . . to something being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition.”<sup>58</sup> The next two classes, directives and commissives, both have a world-to-words fit, as they are either an attempt to get the hearer to do something, or to commit the speaker to do something in the future. Expressives, which form the fourth class, do not have a direction of fit as “the speaker is neither trying to get the world to match the words nor the words to match the world; rather the truth of the expressed proposition is presupposed.”<sup>59</sup> In the final class, declarations, there is simultaneously a worlds-to-word fit *and* a word-to-world fit, because by this type of act the world *is* changed but it is also represented as having been changed. The examples Searle uses of declarations are the successful pronouncing of a couple as husband and wife and of a declaration of war.

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid* p12

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid* p15

As indicated above, Austin considered any speech-act to imply a speech-agent and a degree of intentionality. Searle concurs and explores the whole area of intentionality in a much more nuanced way, especially the connections between meaning, intention and communication. He draws a distinction between sentence or word meaning, and speaker or utterance meaning. Sentence meaning is bound by semantic or syntactic rules. Speaker meaning is governed by the intention(s) of the speaker. In direct speech-acts sentence and speaker meaning may be identical; this is not necessarily the case in indirect speech-acts. As one thing is said by means of an indirect speech-act, something more is also being said. For example, the assertive, “You are standing on my feet”, is, at the same time a directive intended to effect the removal of the offending foot! The sentence meaning is perfectly clear and in the appropriate context the speaker’s meaning is also unambiguous. For Searle, speaker meaning must be primary in any consideration of the *use* of language for “even though language constrains speaker meaning, speaker meaning is still the primary form of linguistic meaning, because the linguistic meaning of sentences functions to enable speakers of the language to use sentences to mean something in utterances.”<sup>60</sup> The relationship is worked out in detail in *Expression and Meaning* not only with regard to indirect speech-acts but also concerning fictional discourse and metaphor.<sup>61</sup> At its most basic the connection between meaning, intention and communication can be expressed, according to Searle, in the following way: “In speaking I attempt to communicate certain things to my hearer by getting him to recognize my intention to communicate just those things.”<sup>62</sup> A further question, which is linked to this, is concerning how a speaker imposes meaning on the words he or she utters or inscribes. Searle’s answer issues from his understanding that

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<sup>60</sup> J Searle, *Mind, Language* p 140

<sup>61</sup> J Searle, *Expression and Meaning* chaps 2-4

<sup>62</sup> J Searle, *Speech Acts* p 43

“meaning is a derived form of intentionality.”<sup>63</sup> There are a number of levels of intentionality in a speech-act, each of which has to fulfil *conditions of satisfaction* (or success). At the simplest level, for example “an assertion is satisfied when what is asserted is true, a promise is satisfied when it is carried out and an order satisfied when it is carried out well.”<sup>64</sup> Searle, however, reckons there is a much more a complex network of intentions and conditions of satisfaction. There is the intention to issue an utterance such as “it is raining” and the actual utterance fulfils that condition of satisfaction. This utterance has a further condition of satisfaction, in this case a truth condition, that is, it must be raining. A final element of the speaker’s intention will be successful if he or she has clearly communicated to the hearer that it is raining. Meaning, intention and communication are therefore inextricably bound together in Searle’s view.<sup>65</sup> Borrowing an idea from Paul Grice, he is prepared to say that human beings in their communication succeed in producing understanding in others “by getting them to recognise our intention to produce that understanding.”<sup>66</sup> While acknowledging the bond that holds meaning, intention and communication together Searle also wishes to emphasise their distinctiveness. This allows his theory to take into account non-standard speech-acts such as lying. It is necessary to keep separate “the intention which is the essence of meaning, from the intention to communicate.”<sup>67</sup> In a lie the main condition of satisfaction is that the utterance is issued and this can be done successfully without the speaker believing what the utterance says he or she should believe. Searle developed this thinking in a number of directions and his book

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<sup>63</sup> J Searle, *Mind, Language* p 141

<sup>64</sup> N Fotion, *Searle* p102

<sup>65</sup> It was around this nexus of meaning, intention and communication that Searle had a dispute with Derrida see *Glyph* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1977) pp 172-208

<sup>66</sup> J Searle, *Mind, Language* p144

<sup>67</sup> J Searle in *John Searle and his Critics* E Lepore & R Van Gulick (Oxford: Blackwell 1991) p 85

*Intentionality* signalled a shift in his focus away from language and speech; it is subtitled *An essay in the philosophy of mind*.

Work on speech-act theory has continued to build on, modify and develop the foundational work of Austin and Searle and many new avenues of exploration have been opened up either as a complement to the theory or in conflict with it. Often it has taken the form of an interdisciplinary study, which can encompass “philosophical, linguistic and psychological issues.”<sup>68</sup> Even when scholars react against speech-act theory, it is impossible to ignore or overlook either the impact of the theory, or the commonalities that exist as the investigator or theorist approaches the common topic – that of language and speech. An example of this is the programmatic text of relevance theory by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson. While challenging the assumption that speech-act theory is foundational to the development of any general pragmatic theory, they still have to address some of the issues raised by it.<sup>69</sup> They also have to deal with some of the same issues and come to similar conclusions as speech-act theorists. While limiting their enquiry mainly to “ostensive-inferential communication”, they state that its main purpose “consists in making manifest to an audience one’s intention to make manifest a basic layer of information.”<sup>70</sup>

John Stewart, a communications theorist, offers a further interesting example of someone who departs from many of the tenets of speech-act theory but who is dependent to a degree on Austin’s ground-breaking work, especially his assault on the descriptivist fallacy. In his major work of 1995, *Language as Articulate Contact*, Stewart is concerned to provide an

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<sup>68</sup> K Bach & R Harnish, *Linguistic Communication and speech Acts* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1979) p xii

<sup>69</sup> D Sperber & D Wilson *Relevance* (Oxford: Blackwell 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 1995) pp 243-254

<sup>70</sup> D Sperber & D Wilson *Relevance* p 54



alternative view of language to what he designates the symbolic model. His analysis of this model is similar to, if not identical to what has already been called “scientific”, “representational” or “descriptivist” models above. The emphasis must be placed, according to Stewart, on the way language is used.

As Humboldt and others have recognised, it makes a significant difference whether one treats language as a formed or created product or as a dynamic fluid process. The former move hypostatizes what is lived as event and imports the subject-object distinction into language scholarship. Although this strategy undoubtedly allows the language scholar to proceed more “scientifically,” it may also distort the phenomena of interest beyond recognition. Little can be learned about language as it is experienced by applying a paradigm that works best – and then only partially – for concrete nouns.<sup>71</sup>

In the course of chapters 2 and 3 of his book he traces the way the symbol model has generally been the dominant one and his examples are particularly chosen to show this. The first of these chapters traces the use of this model from the pre-Socratic philosophers through to Wilhelm von Humbolt and the second looks at exemplars of the model in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The evidence that he adduces and the examples he offers find support elsewhere. In the two-volume work, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought*, the authors trace through a similar trajectory to Stewart in Volume 1 and then investigate a number of seminal thinkers in Volume 2. The first volume majors on the view of language that they designate as “surrogationalism”<sup>72</sup>; this is almost identical to Stewart’s symbol model and is seen as the dominant model. A number of reactions to this are documented and include von Humbolt

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<sup>71</sup> J Stewart, *Language as Articulate Contact* (New York: SUNY Press 1995) p 29

<sup>72</sup> R Harris & TJ Taylor *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought vol 1* (London; Routledge 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 1997) p 39

(Volume1), and in Volume 2, JR Firth, the later Wittgenstein and JL Austin. The authors observe that the Western tradition tends,

. . . to divorce language from its human sponsors focusing instead on the internal logical or grammatical mechanisms by which it putatively works as a situation-neutral device for encoding and decoding information about an objectively given extra-linguistic world.

From time to time antinomian thinkers have come forward to restore the lost perspective, redirecting attention to language as a complex of behavioural patterns embedded in the social lives of human beings.<sup>73</sup>

According to them John Austin was such an “antinomian” thinker. Their judgement is confirmed by GJ Warnock who suggests that there have been a number of philosophers who “quite deliberately did not simply take up questions as they found them, or join the on-going debate in the approved academic terms and style.” For Warnock, Austin “was that kind of philosopher.”<sup>74</sup>

Charles Taylor, in his lecture *Language and Human Nature*,<sup>75</sup> takes a rather different route through the history of rival theories of language. He proposes that two main theories have vied for supremacy – the “designative” and the “expressive” theories. The designative theory is of the same “family” as the symbol model above, it “accounts for meaning by correlating signs to bits of the world.” Whereas the expressive theory gives an account of meaning that “cannot avoid subject-related properties . . . and hence does not allow of an

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<sup>73</sup> JE Joseph, *Landmarks in Linguistic Thought vol 2* (London; Routledge 2001) p 92

<sup>74</sup> GJ Warnock, *JL Austin* (London: Routledge 1991) p 153

<sup>75</sup> C Taylor, *Human Agency and Language, Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985) see chapter 9

objective science.”<sup>76</sup> In a later lecture, Taylor suggests that language, particularly as understood within the expressive theory, “serves to articulate and found public space.” While the idea of public space is commonly used,

. . . to refer to institutions and societal manifestations, I am expanding it to conversations and everything in between, I want to stress that the same human power of bringing us together in a common focus through speech is at work in these and other contexts.<sup>77</sup>

There is no complete unanimity in the assessment made by these scholars. Stewart and Harris and Taylor see the account of Genesis 2, of Adam naming the animals, as a clear example of the symbol/surrogationalist theory. They understand the *naming* of the animals to be concerned with the correctness of the designation. This focus on naming, which occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament in particular, is seen as further evidence that the Bible’s language is essentially rooted in the symbol theory. These same authors attribute a similar view to Augustine as much of his thought and language<sup>78</sup> echoes the Bible. Taylor offers an alternative view, both the Bible and Augustine are for him exemplars of his expressive theory, because the “originator of meaning, God, is an expressivist.”<sup>79</sup> A clearer grasp of the theological implications of this narrative would promote the expressivist view, as the task of Adam is not to simply get the names of the animals right, rather it is to bestow these names with authority, as this represents part of what it means to have dominion over “every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen1:28).<sup>80</sup> Whatever the truth about which theory the Bible or Augustine supports – whether it is one or the other; or even both at the same

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid*, p 221

<sup>77</sup> *ibid*, p 260 n11

<sup>78</sup> See R Harris & TJ Taylor *Landmarks vol 1* chapter 3 and J Stewart, *Language* pp 47-53

<sup>79</sup> C Taylor, *Human Agency* p 223

<sup>80</sup> This judgment is more theologically appropriate See H Blocher’s comments on the use of language as a mark of human authority and “a rudimentary kind of science”, *In the Beginning* p 91

time – one thing is evident, and that is, that the questioning of the “descriptivist fallacy” did not begin with JL Austin. Perhaps Austin’s main contribution was to raise the question again in a sharp and innovative manner.

It would certainly be a mistake to claim that the question of how people do things with words had never been raised before Austin focussed the question in the way he did. As has already been seen in chapter 1 of this study, according to Calvin, speech *does* things. It brings about relationships, it edifies, rebukes and challenges people; it has a dynamic that means it accomplishes things. A further example from Calvin can illustrate the point. In his handling of the incident of the illness and recovery of King Hezekiah in the book of Isaiah, Calvin has a particular eye to the *use* being made of language.<sup>81</sup> Calvin notes the fact that Isaiah comes to Hezekiah on two occasions; the first to speak of illness and death (Is 38:1&2) and the second to speak of remission and deliverance (Is 38:4-6). “What interval of time elapsed between the prophet’s departure and return we know not,” Calvin observes, but he understands a reason for these visits are that the king “might be more powerfully excited to seek the favour of God.”<sup>82</sup> The relationship between the two statements from God – illness and death, remission and deliverance – provokes the following observation by Calvin:

But it may be thought strange that God, having uttered a sentence, should soon afterwards be moved, as it were, by repentance to reverse it; for nothing is more at variance with his nature than a change of purpose. I reply, while death was threatened against Hezekiah, still God had not decreed it, but determined in this manner to put to the test the faith of Hezekiah. We must therefore, suppose a

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<sup>81</sup> I owe this illustration, which I have adapted somewhat, to P Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* pp 197-200

<sup>82</sup> CC vol 7 p 157

condition to be implied in that threatening; for otherwise Hezekiah would not have altered, by repentance and prayer the irreversible decree of God.<sup>83</sup>

The actual intention of God, conveyed in this “form of the words”, was “. . . because he was unwilling that Hezekiah should die,” rather, “it was the purpose of God to humble his servant.”<sup>84</sup>

If Calvin’s observations are stated in terms of speech-act theory, he is acknowledging both the propositional content and the illocutionary force of the first statement by God. Calvin is simply recognising something that receives a more structured and formal definition in speech-acts theory. It is “the same utterance act may be performed with a variety of different intentions . . . and the same utterance may constitute the performance of several different illocutionary acts.”<sup>85</sup> John Searle follows this statement with an illustration,

For example suppose at a party a wife says “It’s really quite late”. That utterance may be at one level a statement of fact; to her interlocutor, who has just remarked on how early it was, it may be (and be intended as) an objection; to her husband it may be (and intended as) a suggestion of even a request (“Let’s go home”) as well as a warning (“You’ll feel rotten in the morning if we don’t”).<sup>86</sup>

The intention here is certainly not to attribute speech-act theory to Calvin anachronistically. It is simply to observe that a close examination of speech yields an understanding of what is *being done* with language – what action it is performing. Many other names may be included here of those who have observed and commented on this aspect of speech. So, for

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<sup>83</sup> CC vol 7 pp 157-158

<sup>84</sup> CC vol 7 p 158

<sup>85</sup> J Searle, *Speech Acts* p 70

<sup>86</sup> *ibid* pp 70-71

example, Martin Luther said that “there is no mightier or nobler work of man than speech.”<sup>87</sup> Later Thomas Reid (1710-1796) concentrated on the analysis of “vulgar” language (akin to Austin’s “ordinary” language) and produced a theory of “social operations” that was a precursor of speech-act theory according to Karl Schuhmann and Barry Smith in their article “Elements of Speech Act Theory in the Work of Thomas Reid”.<sup>88</sup> In the same article, Schuhmann and Smith also point to the similar theory of Adolf Reinach (1884-1917), who propounded his theory using the term “social acts”. Again, it must be emphasised, the purpose of these examples is not to attribute speech-act theory to these observers in a simplistic way, but to show that when they analyse the use of language there is some common ground that has reached a formalised expression in the works of theorists like Austin and Searle.

To return to the thesis of John Stewart briefly, whatever the divergences seen in the various theories considered, the basic notion stands, that a descriptivist/symbolic theory of language is not sufficient explanation or model to account for language in its regular usage. The summary he gives of the main features of his argument contains the following elements:

. . . it is conceptually and practically useful to treat language first and foremost not as a system but as a kind of human event . . . Second this event is the site of human being, the dynamic that distinguishes us as understanders . . . Third this ongoing collaborative engagement in understanding via language is the human’s way of constructing the world . . . the sphere of coherence that we inhabit. Fourth this understanding is negotiated; it occurs in contact between persons,

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<sup>87</sup> Quoted in O Bayer, *Living by Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2003) p 47

<sup>88</sup> ‘Elements of Speech Act Theory in the Work of Thomas Reid’ *History of Philosophy Quarterly* Vol 7 No 1 January 1990 pp 47-66

which is to say that these events are irreducibly dialogic or interpersonal. Finally the understanding-in-context is articulate, which means that it accomplishes differentiation or categorization and that it occurs paradigmatically as oral-aural contact.<sup>89</sup>

It can be seen from this brief review of differing perspectives that some common themes emerge. Each view identifies a personal, intentional agent, who does or accomplishes something by speaking. Further, there is normally a relational element in that speech situation. This accords with most peoples' experience of human speech, for as social beings communication is at the heart of everyday relationships.

### **A Perspective on Knowledge and Testimony**

A group of philosophers who have worked on overlapping philosophical themes (especially in the area of epistemology) produced a programmatic text in *Faith and Rationality* in 1983. This book addresses the issues of the collapse of classical foundationalism; the impossibility of the neutral assessment of facts without the influence of an overarching world-view. In many ways these philosophers built on the work of Thomas Reid. Plantinga, for example, follows Reid in not being prepared to admit to such a narrow definition of the foundation of a rational noetic structure as many Enlightenment thinkers and their heirs. A starting point for him in describing rationality is to see the rational person as believing in an epistemically reasonable way. In a later development of his thought, Plantinga says,

. . . the best way to construe warrant, is in terms of proper function: a belief has warrant for a person, if it is produced by her cognitive faculties functioning

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<sup>89</sup> J Stewart, *Beyond the Symbol Model* (New York: SUNY Press 1996) p 54

properly in a congenial epistemic environment to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true or verisimilitudinous belief.<sup>90</sup>

The notion of design does not have to have theistic overtones, according to Plantinga, it can be explained in naturalistic ways.<sup>91</sup> To classify his view as an example of naturalistic epistemology, however, is not appropriate. It is “ill-named”, because “the most plausible way to think of warrant from the theistic perspective is in terms of naturalistic epistemology.” Further, naturalism “flourishes best in the context of a theistic view of human beings, and this means for Plantinga that naturalism in epistemology requires supernaturalism in anthropology.”<sup>92</sup>

The significance of Plantinga’s views for this study is that it is impossible to avoid the ontological and, perhaps ultimately, theological roots to epistemological questions. Rationality will be dependent on what sort of beings humankind are thought to be. If humankind is thought to be created by God and in the image of God, then it will not be a problem to see the noetic structure as properly including belief about God as basic. If however, humankind is only the product of blind evolutionary processes, then belief in God is deemed illusory, a malfunction of cognitive processes, or simply beyond any certain knowledge. As he expresses it,

Here we see the intimate connection between epistemology and metaphysics. The nose of the ontological camel pokes into the epistemological tent; for what you take to be properly basic will depend in part, upon what sort of creatures you think human beings are.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> A Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press 1993 ) p 237

<sup>91</sup> See Plantinga, *Proper Function* p 13

<sup>92</sup> Plantinga, *Proper Function* p 46

<sup>93</sup> Plantinga *Proper Function* p 183



In a later work, *Warranted Christian Belief*, he argues his case for acknowledging belief in God as properly basic.

Another contributor to *Faith and Rationality*, William Alston, supplements and modifies some of the major themes of the book. Alston, who has focused much of his research on religious experience, argues that a person's religious experience has as much validity as his or her sense perception and can be accepted as basic or foundational. The proper assessment, however, cannot be decided except from inside, "though outsiders can find out something about it from hearing what insiders say, seeing what they do, and reading what they write."<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere Alston addresses the issue of "knowing what we know"<sup>95</sup> in a way that supports Plantinga's contentions concerning the "design plan" and a "congenial epistemic environment". He argues that we have knowledge in a particular domain without relying on particular bits of knowledge in that domain. As this is a "basic feature of the human cognitive situation" there would seem to be no reason to make a particular difficulty "for the claims to knowledge of God."<sup>96</sup> The basic argument here is that "religious knowledge has the same status as other large departments of human knowledge," and that the way reliable beliefs about God are formed are a theological issue, in the same way that beliefs about the physical world are a scientific issue.<sup>97</sup> As an implication of this, he says,

. . . that with respect to modes of cognitive access to God that involve genuine interaction with God . . . it falls to theology to determine where reliable information about God is to be obtained, since it is within the purview of theology to determine what sort of divine-human interactions there are, and under what conditions, information is transmitted. Needless to say the

<sup>94</sup> W Alston, *Faith & Rationality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1983) p 132

<sup>95</sup> Title of his essay in CS Evans & M Westphal, *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: eerdmans 1993)

<sup>96</sup> Alston, *Christian Perspective* p 34

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid* p35

interaction does not have to be direct in each individual instance. Thus, even if my knowledge of God comes from written records of divine communication to persons in the past, or from the way in which such traditions are communicated through the church, I still owe my knowledge to divine human interaction, even if I do not in my own person engage in dynamic interaction with God.<sup>98</sup>

In another work, *Perceiving God*, Alston seeks to show the importance of divine-human interaction, that an “experiential awareness of God, or . . . *perception* of God, makes an important contribution to the grounds of religious belief.”<sup>99</sup> This awareness or perception of God has:

. . . profound implications as to the character of our interrelations with God. Just think of the ways we can relate to someone we know by face to face contact, and the ways we can relate to someone we have only heard about or have only hypothesized. It is only in the former case that the distinctively “personal” relationship of love, friendship, mutual sharing, resentment, delight in each other’s company and self-revelation is possible. Likewise it is only if we can perceive God that such modes of human-divine interaction are possible.<sup>100</sup>

Experience of God is not, therefore, just one fact amongst many which has evidential value in establishing (possible) existence of God; rather, “the chief value of the experience of God is that this enables us to enter into personal relationship with God,” enjoying the “loving communion with God for which we were created.”<sup>101</sup>

George Mavrodes, another contributor to *Faith and Rationality*, reflects on the essays of Plantinga and Wolterstorff in particular and argues that their approach, which he defines as

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid* p 37

<sup>99</sup> Alston *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1991) p 1

<sup>100</sup> *ibid* pp 303-304

<sup>101</sup> *ibid* p 2

“negative apologetics” (a rejection of the uses of evidence in arguing for belief in God) should be softened to include a place for arguments and evidences where necessary. His basic question, however, is commensurate with their concerns; are we within our intellectual rights in believing in God? In an earlier work, *Belief in God*, he argues that the possibility of constructing a set of compelling arguments that rational people will be obliged to accept is an extremely unlikely one. The insistence on this is an extremely stringent requirement and one which rarely, if ever, is used for other beliefs. If an argument is sound, that is, it is valid and its premises are true, then, Mavrodes argues, it is cogent for a person. It does not have to convince every rational person, but it must convince someone. Whilst the arguments for the existence of God may not be universally convincing they may nonetheless be person-relative proofs; that is, they may provide the evidence that an individual needs to form belief. This notion of person-relative proof “takes account of the fact that not every piece of knowledge is universally shared. It also recognizes that one person’s knowledge may properly be used as a basis upon which some further advance for that person can be built.”<sup>102</sup>

Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his chapter of *Faith and Rationality*, argues for a view of rationality which has a “family resemblance” to that of Mavrodes. The rationality of belief according to Wolterstorff “can only be determined in context – historical and social context and even more narrowly, personal context.” He then adds that the “proper question is always and only whether it is rational for this or that particular person in this or that situation . . . to believe so-and-so. Rationality is always *situated* rationality.”<sup>103</sup> Wolterstorff, like Plantinga, takes up ideas expressed by Thomas Reid and develops them as part of his epistemology. As Reid argues, the majority of beliefs are produced by innate

<sup>102</sup> G Mavrodes, *Belief in God* (Lanham: University Press of America 1970) p 47

<sup>103</sup> *Faith and Rationality* p55 emphasis his

dispositions and properties in an immediate, non-inferential manner, and that these deliverances of the noetic structure ought to be trusted unless reason provides grounds not to trust them. This is in contradiction to Cartesian methodological doubt. For Reid, it is possible to say that the “deliverances of our credulity disposition are innocent until proved guilty, not guilty until proved innocent.”<sup>104</sup> Likewise Wolterstorff agrees that in the majority of situations most people work on the basis of trusting their beliefs unless reason can be given for refraining. Beliefs are not “nonrational unless we have a reason for believing.”<sup>105</sup> He is particularly concerned to show, in his book *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, that classical foundationalism cannot bear the weight many wish it to. In agreement with Plantinga he sees the criteria of foundationalism as inadequate to provide what it requires, that is to provide “a foundation of indubitables”.<sup>106</sup>

As part of an alternative approach to rationality, Wolterstorff argues that there are three different kinds of belief involved in weighing any theory. Some are *data beliefs*; “we cannot resolve to take as data only what we know indubitably”, therefore, there is no other recourse than “taking as data that which I find myself believing to be true.”<sup>107</sup> Alongside these beliefs are a whole set of other beliefs which have a confirming or verifying role in the acceptance of data beliefs; these Wolterstorff labels *data-background beliefs*. A scientist, for example, takes certain things as data because of his or her acceptance of a whole web of theory concerning proper conditions, ways of measuring, standards of procedure etc. In the process of weighing a theory there are also certain beliefs involved as to what constitutes an appropriate outcome. These are considered to be *control beliefs*. “They include beliefs about

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<sup>104</sup> *ibid* p163 and p 162 for definition of “credulity disposition”

<sup>105</sup> *ibid* p163

<sup>106</sup> N Wolterstorff *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1984) p 56

<sup>107</sup> *ibid* p 66

the requisite logical or aesthetic structure of a theory, beliefs about the entities to whose existence a theory may correctly commit us, and the like.”<sup>108</sup> Control belief causes some theories to be rejected because they are inconsistent with those beliefs. They also produce new theories that are consistent with themselves. The effects of these control beliefs are traced by Wolterstorff from the Spanish Inquisition to Logical Positivism to show that no one is entirely immune from beliefs which may distort or override the evidence or theories of others. Although he admits that *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* is no more than a preliminary “*sketch of some elements of a theory of theorizing*”,<sup>109</sup> it contains many of the seed thoughts of Reformed epistemology. An element of “family resemblance” can be seen in this volume with Plantinga’s thinking on proper function and design plan with its underlying ontological questions. Following Thomas Reid and in a manner similar to Mavrodes, Wolterstorff sees rationality as situational, intimately linked with its context. That situation for the Christian believer involves particular control beliefs and commitments. “To be a Christian is . . . to belong to a certain community with a tradition. But what identifies this community is that its members are those who are fundamentally committed to being Christ’s followers.”<sup>110</sup> These beliefs and commitments are, to a degree, person-relative, because they will not necessarily issue in the same action for different people and situations.

Reformed epistemology has provoked a good deal of debate and three of the major criticisms leveled against it deserve brief comment. The first is that it is inappropriate to include belief in God amongst basic belief. This criticism is often raised on the basis of a

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<sup>108</sup> *ibid* pp 67-68

<sup>109</sup> *ibid* p 22, emphasis in the original

<sup>110</sup> *ibid* p 71

lack of consensus concerning belief in God. If, however, disagreement is used as a criterion for dismissing a belief, then few warranted beliefs would survive. It will depend on the reasons and arguments behind the disagreement, not on the fact of the disagreement *per se*. At this point Reformed epistemologists would wish to discern whether the initial belief has been arrived at in an arbitrary way, or on the basis of evidence or argument which is cogent for that person in that situation.

The second major criticism is that Reformed epistemology is only fideism in disguise. It seems inappropriate to accuse them of maintaining belief in God in defiance of reason, as a strong fideist might. There is room in their thought for reason in the formation of belief and evidence can play a part. This is particularly true of Plantinga who has not only written a book which uses the ontological argument for belief in God; but also has delivered a lecture on several occasions entitled “Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments”.<sup>111</sup>

The third major criticism is that the concept of “proper basicity” has not been pursued rigorously enough and that there is need for greater clarity on the criteria used to identify those experiences which are claimed to be grounds for belief.

A major contribution that Reformed epistemology has made is in its approach to rationality. In locating it in a person-relative framework and acknowledging its situated nature, the personal element in knowing has been rehabilitated. The disengaged, “objective” spectator is seen to be simply a construct of an earlier generation. “The Enlightenment myth of the rational human being proceeding magisterially through life, assessing the evidence for and against the propositions that come to his attention and coolly deciding on the basis of that assessment is just that: a myth.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Plantinga, *Christian Perspectives* p 57

<sup>112</sup> Plantinga, *Christian Perspectives* p 57

The evidentialist approach is no more than a particularly restrictive set of control beliefs in operation, whereas the situated rationality of Reformed epistemology means, in Wittgenstinian terms, that “[W]e can talk sensibly about specific language games and belief-systems and their particular criteria of meaning and credibility.”<sup>113</sup> Likewise the concept of person-relative proofs encourages the consideration of Christian belief on its own terms, particularly the content and purpose of Scripture. The realm of the personal is the congenial epistemic environment for Christian belief for, as Gerald Downing suggests, a model that Scripture uses for “the activity of divine manifestation is befriending.”<sup>114</sup>

To return to the idea of testimony, it is not only an element in the forming of knowledge; it is operative in the transmitting of knowledge. The classical foundationalist seeks to avoid the infinite regress of justifying beliefs through a particular criterion of basicity, an exercise, according to Plantinga, which is “self-referentially inconsistent”<sup>115</sup> There is an “escape from the problem of infinite regress” and it is, “when we realize that only a speaker or listener can mean something by a word, and that word itself means nothing, for it is persons who stand behind words and meanings with personal commitment.”<sup>116</sup> In his discussion of natural testimony – that which “is to be encountered in everyday circumstances,”<sup>117</sup> as opposed to formal testimony in a court of law – Coady says,

Natural testimony falls into a category of evidence in something like the way promising for instance falls into the category of commitment. One who testifies must be seen as providing evidence for the truth of the relevant proposition *p*, just as one promising must be seen as making a commitment to bring the

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<sup>113</sup> M Harvey, ‘Wittgenstein’s Notion of “Theology as Grammar”’ *Rel Stud* 25 p 99

<sup>114</sup> G Downing quoted in J Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1994) p 291

<sup>115</sup> Plantinga *Faith & Rationality* p 60

<sup>116</sup> RG Greunler, *Meaning and Understanding* (Grand Rapids Zondervan 1991) p 193

<sup>117</sup> Coady, *Testimony* p 38

relevant *p* state of affairs about. We might say that both are cases in which a speaker vouches for *p* but in different ways. By testifying that *p* one vouches for an ascertained connection between how one says things are and how they are actually.<sup>118</sup>

What is seen and heard, what is experienced, is testified to and that testimony has personal backing. Witness or testimony can be a reliable way of forming belief or gaining knowledge.

The contributors to *Faith and Rationality* have addressed the function and value of testimony in belief formation in their later works. Plantinga takes up the question of testimony in *Warrant and Proper Function*. Taking up and developing a Reidian perspective he is prepared to admit that testimony does provide warrant for belief even if it does not carry as much weight as the original experience or perception. Nevertheless, he argues that,

Testimony is the source of an enormously large proportion of our most important beliefs; it is testimony and learning from others that makes possible intellectual achievement and culture; testimony is the very foundation of civilization. The Enlightenment looked down its rationalistic nose at testimony and tradition, comparing them invidiously with science; but without learning by testimony, clearly science would be impossible.<sup>119</sup>

Similarly William Alston takes up the idea of testimony in his later work, *Perceiving God*, to which reference has already been made. As he concludes his case for “Christian Mystical Perceptual Doxastic Practice” (CMP) and its rationality, he turns briefly to the relation

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<sup>118</sup> *ibid* p 43

<sup>119</sup> *Warrant and Proper Function* p 77



between first- and third-persons justification.<sup>120</sup> His argument at this point in the book is, “that one to whom God is apparently presenting himself as  $\phi$  is thereby prima facie justified in believing God to be  $\phi$ .”<sup>121</sup> The question to be faced is whether or not this justification can “be ‘transferred’, perhaps in a weaker form, through testimony, as is the case with sense-perceptual beliefs, memory reports and scientific results.”<sup>122</sup> He argues that:

Much of what a particular individual knows (justifiably believes) about the world derives from testimony. If I had only to rely on my own experience and reasoning alone, I would know little of history, geography, science and arts, to say nothing of what is going on in the world currently. We generally suppose that justification is transferred via testimony from someone who has learned something from perception, memory, reasoning, or some combination thereof, to society at large. Why should it be different in the religious sphere?<sup>123</sup>

He suspects that those who say it should be different are working with, or imposing, a double standard. An argument used to treat mystical experience differently is that it is a “private” experience. Alston questions whether it is any more a private experience than sense-perception. He admits that it is not a universally shared experience and that there are no “[T]ight condition for intersubjective testing of mystical reports” but “that does not prevent the transfer of justification by testimony.”<sup>124</sup> Although, for Alston, CMP may have a weaker epistemic status than sense-perception, for example, testimony to it exactly parallels secular examples of testimony. George Mavrodes, in his book *Revelation and Religious Belief*, touches briefly on the subject of testimony, placing it alongside personal experience as the main means by which people learn. There is, for Mavrodes, something

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<sup>120</sup> Alston, *Perceiving God* see esp. pps 279-284

<sup>121</sup> *ibid* p 279

<sup>122</sup> *ibid* p 27

<sup>123</sup> *ibid* p 280

<sup>124</sup> *ibid* p 282

better than testimony, “richer in epistemic significance than any mere testimony can be. . . That richer thing . . . would be *an experience of our own*.”<sup>125</sup>

Nicholas Wolterstorff takes a different approach in his book *Divine Discourse*. In the chapter “Are we entitled?”, he examines a particular contemporary instance of someone’s story in which it is claimed that God spoke to an individual. Having reviewed the Lockean stance on entitlement, he comes to the question of whether “intelligent, educated, citizens of the modern west – are ever entitled to believe that God speaks.”<sup>126</sup> Having recounted the testimony of “Virginia” and her claim to have heard God speak, Wolterstorff suggests that a Lockean approach to the question of entitlement is inadequate. The attempt of this approach to prove, for example, the existence of the external world is a failure according to the consensus of most philosophers.

Faithful application of the Lockean practice will not yield the belief that this and that external object exist; one can’t get to there starting solely from mental and conceptual facts. None the less we do have available to us very good ways of getting in touch with a great deal of the external world. These ways are the various perceptual practices that have emerged among us and which we all use. .

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This will involve a person acquiring additional experiences, examining those experiences carefully from different perspectives, viewing them in the light of what is already known and believed and how the present experience fits with all of this.<sup>128</sup> The essential thing in Wolterstorff’s view is that although the situation between “Virginia” and those sceptical of her experience is symmetrical, each believing the other is mistaken, it “isn’t quite

<sup>125</sup> G Mavrodes *Revelation in Religious Belief* (Philadelphia: temple University Press 1988) pp 152-153

<sup>126</sup> N Wolterstorff *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995) p 273

<sup>127</sup> *ibid* p 279

<sup>128</sup> *ibid* p 279

symmetrical. Virginia had the experience, the skeptic didn't. And that counts for something.”<sup>129</sup>

CAJ Coady is as sceptical towards Hume's approach to the justification of testimony as Wolterstorff is concerning Locke's view of entitlement. Hume is concerned with checking testimony or reports against reality; believing what might be found is a “total lack of correlation between the reports and the reported facts.” Things, according to Coady are not this straightforward, because “the existence of a language in which the testimony is given already guarantees some positive correlations.”<sup>130</sup>

The shared language in which testimony is given underpins the phenomenon of what Coady calls the “communal epistemological trust.” He finds backing for this approach in both Donald Davidson and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Concerning Davidson's project, he says that, “[T]he fundamental insight is that communication is only possible between beings whose outlooks overlap to some extent and the complex, relatively sophisticated communication characteristic of language users is only possible where the communicants share a good deal of their outlooks.”<sup>131</sup> This is expressed in a more complex form in Davidson's *principle of charity*.<sup>132</sup> The essential nature of this insight has validity on its own, according to Coady, without having to carry with it much of the “Davidsonian baggage” concerning “truth-theoretical semantics”.<sup>133</sup> Colin McGinn criticises Davidson's principle as being too strong and wishes to replace the notion of charity with that of empathy, because, according the McGinn, “[Y]ou appreciate the reasonableness of an action by putting yourself into its

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<sup>129</sup> *ibid* p 280

<sup>130</sup> CAJ Coady *Testimony* p 152

<sup>131</sup> *ibid* p 154

<sup>132</sup> See further the quotation from Davidson in *ibid* p156 and the explanation of the two main elements of the theory (the principles of coherence and correspondence) in M Joseph, *Donald Davidson* (Chesham: Acumen Publishing 2004) pp 62-70

<sup>133</sup> *ibid* p 155

agent's shoes, not by forcing him into yours."<sup>134</sup> Coady does not see McGinn's view as fatal to Davidson's approach and although he would wish to moderate it he does not want to dismiss it.

This approach of Davidson has some affinity with a number of themes that are found in Wittgenstein's later writing, in Coady's view. An example of the kind of statement from Wittgenstein that he has in mind is, "[T]he common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language."<sup>135</sup> The reference to the common behaviour of mankind is analogous to Davidson's concept of "a background of shared beliefs."<sup>136</sup> Elsewhere Wittgenstein speaks about this commonality in the following terms,

If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements. This seems to abolish logic but does not do so. – It is only one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state result of measurement. But what we call 'measuring' is partly determined by certain constancy in results of measurement.<sup>137</sup>

Coady's argument, building on the ideas of Wittgenstein and Davidson, is simply that testimony given in a public, generally available language involves the shared outlook and beliefs of that language community and, therefore, that reports given via that medium are often presupposed to be reliable. That is, "an extensive commitment to trusting the reports of others was a precondition of understanding their speech at all."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Quoted in *ibid* p 161

<sup>135</sup> L Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* sect 206 quoted in *ibid* p 156

<sup>136</sup> Davidson quote in *ibid* p 156

<sup>137</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* sect 242 quoted in *ibid* p157

<sup>138</sup> *ibid* 176

All of this does not mean a negation of personal autonomy or a suspension of critical faculties. Even if the Reformed Epistemologists and other thinkers have undermined the Enlightenment ideal of “autonomous knowledge” in recent decades, it is still pertinent to ask, following Coady, if there is “room for any aspirations to a robust degree of cognitive autonomy.” He continues,

Just as the autonomous agent need not utterly renounce his dependence on others, even at the deepest levels of his existence, so the autonomous thinker need not entirely renounce some degree of fundamental reliance on the work of others but rather should deploy it to achieve a genuinely critical stance and a viable independence of outlook. One needs intellectual autonomy to achieve a feasible degree of control over the beliefs one acquires and to ensure one’s thinking is approximately responsive to one’s actual cognitive history and recent intellectual environment. None the less the independent thinker is not one who works everything out for herself, even in principle, but one who exercises a controlling intelligence over input she receives from the normal sources of information whether their basis be individual or communal.<sup>139</sup>

As has already been seen, this accords with Thomas Reid’s view that a foundational element in the acquisition of knowledge comes through trust in the testimony of others.<sup>140</sup> Or as Richard Bauckham expresses it, “. . . testimony, then, of its very nature invites trust”. This, however, is not an unthinking response. “A fundamental attitude of trust is not gullibility but necessary epistemic virtue.”<sup>141</sup> This notion of trust as an intellectual virtue is given some

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<sup>139</sup> *ibid* pp 99-100

<sup>140</sup> See T Reid, *Intellectual Powers* p 640

<sup>141</sup> R Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand rapids: Eerdmans 2006) p 478

backing by Linda Zagzebski in her book *Virtues of the Mind* where she includes “reliance on trustworthy authority” in her list of intellectual virtues.

Such intellectual virtues as intellectual carefulness, thoroughness, reliance on trustworthy authority, courage, and perseverance are traits that are ways of exercising the motivation for knowledge, and since most practices involve to one degree or another the need to acquire true beliefs related to the practice, the full possession of the goods internal to practices relies on the possession of intellectual virtues.<sup>142</sup>

HH Price echoes the Reidian point of view when he states his “Principle A”, which is, “Believe what you are told by others unless or until you have reason for doubting it.”<sup>143</sup> Reid and those who follow him are not advocating naïve gullibility, as has already been indicated above. Rather a basic attitude of trust that is tempered by experience is considered necessary for the acquisition of knowledge. Linda Zagzebski puts this case in these terms:

Trust – knowing when to rely on others – might be considered the reverse side of autonomy, although trust in oneself is also a form of this virtue. . . .we need to trust other people, past and present, since very little of our knowledge comes to us directly.<sup>144</sup>

Before leaving Coady’s consideration of testimony, it is worth considering his discussion of the role of testimony in historical research. Here, he takes issue in particular with the views of RG Collingwood. The reliance that has been placed on the testimony of people in the past by historians of earlier generations would seem to be a natural impulse or assumption. The historian is unable to observe the events first-hand or to replicate them in the present. The

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<sup>142</sup> LT Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996) p 98

<sup>143</sup> Quoted in K Vanhoozer *First Theology* (Leicester Apollos 2002) p360

<sup>144</sup> LT Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* p 160

events are no longer open to observation or experience. It seems therefore that “the recorded testimony of the times would appear to be essential historical data.”<sup>145</sup> This notion is rejected by Collingwood, whose basic claim is, according to Coady, that “all historical knowledge is essentially inferential and systematic and that it is the historian’s imaginative reconstruction or re-enactment of the past which provides the criterion of historical fact.”<sup>146</sup> This approach may well preserve the autonomy of the historian but it in no way guarantees the “scientific” nature of her theorising. Testimony is not the sole datum of historical work and it is not interpretation-free as Coady admits – but it is still part of the data that is sifted and interpreted, and about which the historians can theorise, and upon which build up an appropriate reconstruction. Coady draws a parallel with the natural sciences, in which the role of observational and experimental data is invaluable.

The parallel with observation is relevant precisely because what is a piece of testimony to is us often a piece of observation on the part of our informant, just as our observation may be testimony for him. In science and ordinary life we work with a social concept of observation that is broad enough to include the observation of others . . . ‘It is a fact of observation’ we say confidently, even when we report no observation of our own. If we extend this courtesy to our contemporaries why not to our ancestors?<sup>147</sup>

One of the main interlocutors with Coady and his thesis is Richard Foley. His own study *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others* is part critique and part endorsement of Coady’s view. He regards the possibility of being a disengaged, individualistic observer with some

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<sup>145</sup> Coady *Testimony* p 234

<sup>146</sup> *ibid* p 238

<sup>147</sup> *ibid* p 248

doubt. He labels as “epistemic egoists” those who say “that it sometimes can be reasonable for me to grant authority to others, but only if I have special information about them that gives me reasons to think that they are reliable with respect to the claim in question.”<sup>148</sup> There are others, labelled “epistemic egotists”, who take a more extreme and sceptical stance, they say that it is “never reasonable to grant authority to the opinion of others.”<sup>149</sup>. Neither of these views is wholly coherent according to Foley. In the chapter, “Self-Trust and the Authority of Others”, he clearly recognises that we are dependent on others and their sincerity. “Given the extent to which we rely on others for information, it is important that we are able to determine reliably whether or not someone is sincerely trying to convey information.”<sup>150</sup> This anxiety is considerably lessened if one is able to recognise the *intellectual authority of other people*. After examining the views of Locke concerning one’s attitude to the views and authority of others, Foley concludes,

Locke’s individualism, optimism and egalitarianism are all at work, to make him utterly distrustful of granting intellectual authority to others. Indeed . . . he so emphasises the importance of self-reliance that he seems to be expressing doubts even about granting specialized authority to the opinion of others.<sup>151</sup>

He then turns to consider the views of one of Locke’s critics, Thomas Reid. What he does not want to do here is to take what he considers to be “the desperate Reidian route of stipulating that testimony is *prima facie* credible.”<sup>152</sup> His understanding of Reid’s view of testimony concurs with many aspects of Coady’s, particularly that “in intellectual matters as

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<sup>148</sup> R Foley, *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press 2001) p 86

<sup>149</sup> *ibid*

<sup>150</sup> *ibid* p 83

<sup>151</sup> *ibid* p 91

<sup>152</sup> *ibid* p 98



much as other matters we are thoroughly social beings.”<sup>153</sup> His justification for accepting the testimony of others starts, however, with the individual. He first argues that “trust in one’s own intellectual faculties, procedures and opinions is a part of any nonskeptical life.” While there are “no non-question-begging guarantees of our reliability . . . all our intellectual projects require that we have intellectual faith in ourselves.”<sup>154</sup> And he concludes that:

Most of us would be willing to admit, at least on reflection, that our intellectual faculties have commonalities with those of others and that a large portion of our opinions have been influenced by the same kinds of factors that have influenced others and that we have not cast off these influences. But then, insofar as we have intellectual trust in ourselves, that is, insofar as we are not skeptics, it is reasonable, all else being equal, for us to trust the opinion of others as well.<sup>155</sup>

Jennifer Lackey, in her book *Learning from Words*, offers another perspective on “Testimony as a source of Knowledge” (the sub-title of the book). Her basic thesis is focussed not on what speakers believe, but on what speakers say. “What really matters for the epistemic status of testimony is whether the speaker is a competent testifier, where this is understood in terms of the reliability – or other form of truth-conduciveness – of the statement in question.”<sup>156</sup> Lackey proposes a theory entitled “The Statement View of Testimony”. In this view,

. . . a speaker offers a statement to a hearer, along with the epistemic properties *it* possesses, and a hearer forms a corresponding belief on the basis of understanding

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<sup>153</sup> *ibid* p 99

<sup>154</sup> *ibid*

<sup>155</sup> *ibid* p107

<sup>156</sup> J Lackey, *Learning from Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008) pp 73-74

and accepting the statement in question. Statements are not, therefore, merely vehicles for expressing beliefs but, rather they are the central bearers of epistemic significance themselves.<sup>157</sup>

Although this theory is focussed only on the epistemic value of testimony, it cannot entirely escape the impact of the person testifying. As she observes, “[O]f course, often times, it is precisely *because* a speaker is insincere or an incompetent believer that she is an incompetent or unreliable testifier.”<sup>158</sup> And that, for the purposes of this study, is an important point because the speaker remains a significant factor in the reception or rejection of testimony. However much distance Lackey wants to put between herself and Coady, Foley and Reid, her conclusion is that “being a competent believer and a sincere testifier are epistemically relevant only insofar as they bear on the speaker’s capacity to be a competent testifier.”<sup>159</sup> Towards the end of the book, Lackey describes and discusses an approach that she calls “The Interpersonal View of Testimony”. Here the interpersonal relationship is the “focus of the epistemology of testimony.” Within that relationship, the assurance offered by the speaker or the invitation to trust her is “responsible for conferring epistemic value on the testimonial beliefs acquired.” Finally, “the epistemic justification or warrant provided by these features of a testimonial exchange is *non-evidential* in nature.”<sup>160</sup> One of her chief complaints against this view is that they conflate “psychological, moral or pragmatic significance with epistemic significance. She further objects to the proponents of this view who argue that “non-interpersonal views of testimony . . . miss a significant part of true communication.”<sup>161</sup> Whatever the situation is at the level of interpersonal relationships, Lackey believes that “the central epistemological goal is the acquisition of true beliefs and

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<sup>157</sup> *ibid* p 72

<sup>158</sup> *ibid* p 74

<sup>159</sup> *ibid*

<sup>160</sup> *ibid* p 221

<sup>161</sup> *ibid* p 249

the avoidance of false ones.”<sup>162</sup> To focus on the context of the testimony (the relationship) rather than the content (the words spoken), seems to her to be misguided. Once the focus is on the statements of testimony, the testimony itself can be seen as generative of knowledge. Both speaker and hearer contribute to that knowledge but any deficiencies in the speaker’s knowledge or beliefs are not a barrier if the words spoken remain a reliable testimony.

To posit a dilemma here, especially when a role for the testifier is, at the very least tacitly acknowledged, seems to be unnecessary. It is somewhat redolent of the dichotomy often made in theological discussion between personal and propositional revelation, as if these were two mutually exclusive categories. Listening to (and understanding and believing) the words of testimony is listening (and responding) to a person. Much the same kind of thing can be said about revelation. So, for example, John Frame states as the basic thesis of his book, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, that “God’s word, in all its qualities and aspects, is a personal communication from him to us.” This “personal communication” does not entail any denial of the need (or use) of propositions to be communicated; rather, “God’s speech is often propositional: God’s conveying information to us.”<sup>163</sup> Would replacing “communication” and “speech” in the above quotation from Frame with “testimony” make a radical difference to his thesis and its meaning? Not necessarily, as God’s “testimony” would still be person-to-person communication and would still be the means of “conveying information to us.” If God’s speech or testimony about himself (his words, intentions and demands) is considered to be revelation – in the sense of making the unknown known – then that testimony will be, in Lackey’s terms, generative of knowledge. This kind of personal

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<sup>162</sup> *ibid*

<sup>163</sup> J Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing 2010) p 3

(or better self-) testimony is not really dealt with in the literature on testimony that has been reviewed but it is of great importance in the context of considering God's speaking.

Nicholas Wolterstorff has clearly separated speaking from revealing in his major study *Divine Discourse*, devoting a whole chapter to this issue (chapter 2). One of the cases that he uses to sustain his thesis is the experience of Augustine when he heard the voice of a child repeat the command "take up and read". This case study is significantly introduced by Wolterstorff saying, "[L]et us suppose for the time being that he [Augustine] was correct in his interpretation of these episodes . . . let us suppose that God did command Augustine to open his copy of Paul's letter."<sup>164</sup> In this putative case concerning God's speaking, Wolterstorff seeks to show that commanding is not revealing. It is certainly not the case that Wolterstorff rejects the idea completely that speaking and revealing are incompatible, as can be seen in his debate about his book with Paul Helm, Philip Quinn and Merold Westphal. In the course of this debate, he makes this statement: "I concede that by speaking one invariably reveals something about oneself: indeed I insist on the point."<sup>165</sup> One of his anxieties about "closing the gap" between speaking and revealing is that "theologians have not adequately explored the implications for our understanding of God of the fact that God speaks."<sup>166</sup> This may be true of a proportion of the theological guild, but it is surely not universally applicable. In response to Paul Helm's desire to close the gap, Wolterstorff responds:

Imagine that, instead of engaging with what Helm said, I asked what his article revealed about its author; he and others would rightly regard that as demeaning, if not insulting. It's in the therapeutic types of situations that we divert our attention

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<sup>164</sup> N Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* p 20

<sup>165</sup> N Wolterstorff, 'Responses to Helm, Quinn and Westphal', *Religious Studies* 37 p294

<sup>166</sup> *ibid*

from what a person says to what their saying reveals about themselves. Strange indeed that our theologians should have assumed that that's how we should deal with God's speaking: rush right past what is asserted, commanded, promised, to ask what is the asserting, the commanding and the promising reveal about God!<sup>167</sup>

A theologian might justly retort that considering the noetic effects of sin, human beings are in a type of "therapeutic" situation. Also, although the words spoken deserve their full weight and appropriate consideration, it is not an invalid question to ask about the nature of the one who utters these assertions, commands and promises, especially considering the profundity and significance of them.

Helm pursues this attempt, "to narrow the distance between revelation and divine speaking (as Wolterstorff presents it) still further, by arguing that taking something as a possible case of divine speaking, and this speaking being intelligible as a command, say, logically requires a background of INIS revelation."<sup>168</sup>

Looking at this claim Wolterstorff responds that "[H]e is thus in the position of holding that the background beliefs we need to interpret divine discourse are themselves derived exclusively from divine discourse."<sup>169</sup> If this objection is considered in terms of the earlier discussions concerning testimony, it is difficult to see where the problem lies in Wolterstorff's objection. This is especially the case if God's speaking is considered as a species of self-testimony, for as assertions are made, commands issued and promises given, they gain both their coherence, authority and veracity from the character of the one speaking. And that character is revealed through the very nature of what is spoken and, indeed, what has been spoken. David Broughton Knox explains it as follows:

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<sup>167</sup> *ibid*

<sup>168</sup> P Helm, 'Speaking and Revealing' *Religious Studies* 37 p 255. INIS revelation is "(a) intended, (b) non-manifestational (ie propositional) and (c) and intransitive", p 253

<sup>169</sup> N Wolterstorff, 'Response' *Religious Studies* p 296

Personal words addressed to us by someone else, when received as personal words, carry within themselves their self-authenticating character; that is to say, when we hear someone addressing us, we know the reality of the existence of that other person, and if we listen to him we become, by the act of listening, personally related to him. So, too, when God addresses man, God's existence is known by those who hear, with a conviction which all theories can never attain.<sup>170</sup>

Persons are self-authenticating; what a person has said provides a set of background beliefs to enable continuing relationships with others. This topic of testimony and its authentication in relation to God needs further consideration.

### **God's Self-authenticating Speech**

Calvin is convinced that Scripture is the authority on which all belief and practice is to be based. This is made clear when he says, for example, "[I]f we turn aside from the Word . . . though we may strive with strenuous haste, yet since we have got off the track, we shall never reach our goal."<sup>171</sup> In the face of claims made by people like Cochlaeus and Eck that the church and its interpretation of Scripture is the final authority, Calvin responds by showing that their quotations from Augustine on this topic are not certain ground on which to build their case. He counters that Augustine has been "wrongly and deceptively" interpreted. He then proceeds to produce other evidence from Augustine to support the authority of Scripture over the church, or anyone else. He is concerned to show, in fact, that God "alone is a fit witness of himself in his word." It is in the context of this argument that Calvin makes some of his clearest statements about the authority of Scripture and the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>170</sup> DB Knox, *The Everlasting God* (Homebush: Lancer 1988) pp 15-16

<sup>171</sup> *Inst* p 73 (1.6.3)

Thus, the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it. The prophets and the apostles do not boast either of their keenness or of anything that obtains credit for them as they speak; nor do they dwell on rational proofs.<sup>172</sup>

... the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.<sup>173</sup>

And this is not a new or recent thought concerning the “self-witness” of God. Over a millennium earlier it was acknowledged by Hilary of Poitiers; “[F]or He whom we can know only through his own utterances is a fitting witness concerning himself.”<sup>174</sup> THL Parker comments on this self-authentication, as follows: “[N]egatively, it [Scripture] neither needs nor can have proof from outside of itself. Positively, it really and actively proves itself.” He goes on to say, “[T]o call this a circular argument would be correct but misleading . . . Once it is posited that God can be known only in that he reveals himself then it must follow that the forms in which he reveals himself can be known to be the form of revelation only by revelation.”<sup>175</sup>

Whether or not Calvin would have seen this issue in these terms is an open question. It certainly does not appear to be problematic to him as he can confidently assert that “Scripture alone teaches about the work of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is necessary

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<sup>172</sup> see *ibid* pp 76-78 (1.7.4)

<sup>173</sup> *ibid* p 79

<sup>174</sup> *ibid* p 79 n 15

<sup>175</sup> THL Parker, *Calvin* p 24, see further on circularity, J Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing 1987) pp 129-133 and P Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford Oxford University Press 2004) pps 260-261 & 271-272

for the validation of Scripture.”<sup>176</sup> This approach is part of Calvin’s way of expressing the inextricable link that he sees between Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest on Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit.<sup>177</sup>

The context of Calvin’s thinking and writing was not just the controversy with the Church of Rome over the issue of authority. He was also embroiled in, sometimes bitter, disputes with other groups as well. In Book 1 Chapter 8 of the Institutes the opponents that he is dealing with are often identified as “free-thinkers” mainly of the Parisian school.<sup>178</sup> Their “[S]cepticism and apparently intelligent contempt . . . often raised doubts in the minds of even firm believers as to whether the Bible is to be trusted.”<sup>179</sup> To them and others he addresses the eighth chapter giving “sufficiently firm proofs . . . to establish the credibility of Scripture.”<sup>180</sup> As these “proofs” follow so closely on Calvin’s discussion of the self-authentication of Scripture, questions have been raised concerning their purpose and whether or not there is a conflict of ideas. BB Warfield, at one point in his discussion of the testimony of the Spirit, says that, “[W]ere it a matter of proving the Scriptures to be the word of God, Calvin would, again, have been at no loss for rational arguments which he was ready to pronounce irresistible.”<sup>181</sup> And he goes on to outline the contents of chapter eight as

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<sup>176</sup> Helm, *Calvin’s Ideas* p 260

<sup>177</sup> *Inst* p 80

<sup>178</sup> see, Parker, *Calvin* p 25

<sup>179</sup> *ibid*

<sup>180</sup> *Inst* p 81, title of chapter 8, book 1

<sup>181</sup> BB Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press 1927) p73



an “adduction of these arguments.”<sup>182</sup> Warfield’s approach has been severely criticised by Robert Reymond, who sees the influence of Scottish common sense realism at work, making the understanding of this chapter “a setting forth a list of evidentiary proofs by which the witnessing Spirit leads us to conclude that the Bible is divine.”<sup>183</sup> Reymond’s view is that Calvin is not providing external evidence, rather “the main *biblical* data in favor of the Bible’s truthfulness.”<sup>184</sup> Noting that the “proofs” used by Calvin were common among the Apologists and Church Fathers, THL Parker sees them as being “intended to show that, granted the premise that Scripture is from the Holy Spirit, there is nothing in the Bible inconsistent with the Spirit.”<sup>185</sup> The thirteen sections of chapter eight certainly all include an examination of relevant texts or ideas from Scripture to underline its consistency, veracity and majesty. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss Warfield’s view as dependent on human reason. He acknowledges Calvin as “the theologian of the Holy Spirit” and does not wish to understate the testimony of the Spirit. As part of this understanding of Calvin’s doctrine of the *Testimonium Spiritus Sancti*, Warfield reckons that:

. . . it equally seemed to him a small matter that man should know what God is, in the paradigms of the intellect, if he did not really know this God in the intimacy of communion which that phrase imports. And equally it seemed to him utterly unimportant that a man would be convinced by stress of rational evidence that the Scriptures are the Word of God, unless he practically embraces these Scriptures as the Word of God and stayed his soul upon them.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> *ibid*

<sup>183</sup> R Reymond in DW Hall & PA Lillback, *Theological Introduction to Calvin’s Institutes* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing 2008) p 52

<sup>184</sup> *ibid*, his emphasis

<sup>185</sup> Parker, *Calvin* p 26

<sup>186</sup> Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* pp 74-75

Another controversy that provoked a response from Calvin was the attitude of some on the Anabaptist wing of the Reformation who wished to break the link between Word and Spirit. Their desire was for a direct relationship with God that bypassed the Word. Calvin was highly sceptical of their claims to guidance by, and teaching from, the Spirit. He says, “I should like to know from them what this spirit is by whose inspiration they are borne up so high that they dare despise the Scriptural doctrine as childish and mean.”<sup>187</sup> This, for Calvin, is a “heinous sacrilege”.<sup>188</sup> There can be no contradiction between Word and Spirit; “[H]e is the Author of the Scriptures: he cannot vary and differ from himself.”<sup>189</sup> The two, Word and Spirit cannot be separated,

For by the kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God’s face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognise him in his own image, namely, in the Word.<sup>190</sup>

This does not mean that there is no room in Calvin’s thinking for the direct intervention of the Spirit as his comment on Acts 16:6 shows. There Paul is “encouraged in no ordinary way to carry on when he knew he had the Spirit of God as guide of his life and action.”<sup>191</sup> And this guidance is not just for people like Paul, as John Hesselink points out. It is open to all believers to pray, that it “may please him [Christ] to increase his grace in us more and more until he has communicated it wholly to us, and in the meantime to uphold us and govern us by his Spirit (prayer after Sermon No 11 on Eph.2:8-10, not in CR).”<sup>192</sup> With

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<sup>187</sup> *Inst* p 93 (1.9.1)

<sup>188</sup> *ibid*

<sup>189</sup> *ibid* pp 94-95 (1.9.2)

<sup>190</sup> *ibid* p 95 (1.9.3)

<sup>191</sup> *CNTC*, vol 5 p 68

<sup>192</sup> quoted in HJ Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2008) p 301

reference to a number of Calvin's commentaries, Hesselink shows that the idea of the active governing of believers' lives by the Spirit is not uncommon in Calvin's thought. It is clear, however, that this is not an acceptance of the subjectivism of his opponents. While God is free to act as he determines, the Spirit does not act in contradiction of the Word. When Calvin returns to the question of authority in Book 4 of the *Institutes*, again he holds together both Word and Spirit as the source of "great assurance and constancy." This is because, based on Jesus' words (John 16:7&13; 14:26):

[Christ] declares that we are to expect nothing more from his Spirit than that he will illumine our minds to perceive the truth of his teaching . . . Now it is easy to conclude how wrongly our opponents act when they boast of the Holy Spirit solely to commend with his name strange doctrines foreign to God's Word – while the Spirit wills to be conjoined with God's Word by an indissoluble bond, and Christ professes this concerning him when he promises the Spirit to his Church.<sup>193</sup>

In the heat of controversy Calvin defines and defends his view of Scripture; it does not need an authority from the outside, from the church. It does not need rational proofs, even though they are available and it must not be separated from the person and activity of the Holy Spirit. It is self-authenticating, the testimony of the Holy Spirit is the source of authority and the grounds of certainty for Scripture according to Calvin.

Some questions, however, remain, including the issue of the "process" of self-authentication, the "object" of the testimony and the relationship of these topics with faith.

William Bouwsma mistakenly attributes an intellectualism to Calvin when, after examples of Calvin's emphasis on the place of doctrine, he says, "[S]uch sentiments point to a

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<sup>193</sup> *Inst* pp1162-1163 (4.8.13)

tendency in Calvin to understand faith less as trust in God's promises than an intellectual assent to a body of propositions."<sup>194</sup> This characterization of Calvin is difficult to sustain in the light of statements that are more experiential than intellectualist, for example:

Such, then, is a conviction that requires no reasons; such, a knowledge with which the best reason agrees – in which the mind truly reposes more securely and constantly than in any reasons; such, finally, a feeling that can be born only of heavenly revelation. I speak of nothing other than what each believer experiences within himself – though my words fall far beneath a just explanation of the matter.<sup>195</sup>

The need for Christian faith to be a matter of experience is to be found in numerous places in Calvin's thought, including such unlikely (at least in Bouwsma's terms) expressions as "I rather experience than understand it,"<sup>196</sup> when talking of the mystery of the Lord's Supper. This experiential form of knowledge is also applied to Scripture when he says that it "exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their own color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste."<sup>197</sup> In Helm's judgment, "Calvin's idea of the testimony of the Holy Spirit (despite the use of the word 'testimony') is modeled on direct sense perception rather than on an inferential process using the data of Scripture, or data external to Scripture, as premises."<sup>198</sup> The caveat, "despite the use of the word 'testimony'," may not be necessary in the light of Coady's work on testimony. He is willing to give centrality to perception, but not to give it priority over memory, inference and testimony, he illustrates this as follows:

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<sup>194</sup> WJ Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988) p 99

<sup>195</sup> *Inst* pp 80-81 (1.7.5)

<sup>196</sup> *ibid* p 1403 (4.17.32)

<sup>197</sup> *ibid* p 76 (1.7.2)

<sup>198</sup> Helm, *Calvin's Ideas* p 256

Memory as an information source makes past perceptions of the individual available in the present, testimony makes past and relatively present perceptions of others available to those who did not perceive for themselves, and inference takes information from all these sources and yields unsuspected information latent in them, new possibilities and prospects for the direction of future perception.<sup>199</sup>

Each of these things is “a social operation of the mind” (in Reidian terminology), and Coady argues for all of them being on a level, “though with perception at the centre.”<sup>200</sup>

What can be said of the “object” of the testimony of the Holy Spirit, that to which the Spirit testifies? Calvin, having said “those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated,” and also that “the certainty it deserves with us it attains by the testimony of the Spirit,” goes on in the same section of the *Institutes*, to amplify these statements. Three elements in particular deserve comment. The testimony, in the first place, produces a “conviction”, and convictions, to state the obvious, only arise when one is convinced about *something*. Testimony is a means of producing conviction about something other than itself. Secondly, the testimony of the Spirit, as part of the process of conviction produces “a prompt eagerness to hearken to God’s voice.” Finally, “we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else’s judgment that Scripture is from God.” Once again the experiential nature of Calvin’s understanding is shown in his use of language when he continues by saying, “we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing on the majesty of God himself) that it [Scripture] has flowed to us from the very mouth of God himself.”<sup>201</sup> This is reinforced in his commentary on Eph 4:32, where his

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<sup>199</sup> CAJ Coady, *Testimony* p 146

<sup>200</sup> *ibid* p 147

<sup>201</sup> *Inst* pp 80-81 (1.8.5), interestingly in J Allen’s translation has “an intuitive perception of God himself,” instead of “gazing on the majesty of God himself.” See *Inst (Allen)* pp 90-91

sense of the mystery concerning the union of Christ and his church is that it is unfathomable. The important thing for him is to know something of it by experience, “[L]et us therefore labour more to feel Christ living in us, than to discover the nature of that communication.”<sup>202</sup> Without doubt if one were to attempt a comprehensive description of Calvin’s epistemology, the role of the person would need to find a place. The main focus of Calvin’s understanding of the testimony of the Spirit is clearly not on the “process” but on that to which the testimony points, God speaking in Scripture. “It is the conviction . . . conferred by the Spirit through a person’s awareness of the cognitive and other content of the Word of God.”<sup>203</sup> A way of summing up that content, for Calvin, is simply to say that it is Christ and the Gospel. In the context of argument for the inseparability of Word and Spirit, he says that “if through the Spirit it [the Word] is really branded upon hearts, if it shows forth Christ, it is the *word of life* . . . ‘converting souls . . . giving wisdom to little ones’.”<sup>204</sup>

There is a clear interrelationship between the self-authentication of Scripture and the exercise of faith in human beings; they are both intimately connected with the work of the Spirit. If it is the testimony of the Spirit that brings conviction concerning the things God speaks in Scripture, it is through “the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits.”<sup>205</sup> And “faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>206</sup> As with testimony, which has to be about something, so with faith, it has to be placed in something. So, says Calvin, the “Word is the basis whereby faith is supported and sustained; if it turns

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<sup>202</sup> *CNTC* vol11 p 210

<sup>203</sup> Helm, *Calvin’s Ideas* p 253

<sup>204</sup> *Inst* p 95 (1.9.3) emphasis added

<sup>205</sup> *ibid* p 537 (3.1.1)

<sup>206</sup> *ibid* p 541 (3.1.4)

away from the Word it falls . . . take away the Word and no faith will then remain.”<sup>207</sup> His “right definition” of faith shows this interrelationship clearly:

Now we shall all possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.<sup>208</sup>

The work of the Spirit in revealing and sealing echoes what has been said already concerning the testimony of the Spirit. The same kind of link is made later in the same chapter of the *Institutes*, when in sections 33 and 34 more detailed expositions of the Spirit’s work in relation to faith is given. A major set of descriptions in these sections focus on “illumination”, “light” and what can and cannot be seen.<sup>209</sup> Again, the language used, as in the case of testimony, is as much experiential as intellectualist. This is also clear from his commentary on Romans 10:10:

But let us note that the seat of faith is not in the head but in the heart. I am not going to argue about the part of the body in which faith is located, but since the word *heart* generally means a serious and sincere affection, I maintain that faith is a firm and effectual confidence and not just a bare idea.<sup>210</sup>

This passage seems to contradict a tendency in Calvin scholarship to view Calvin’s understanding of the notions of faith and knowledge in purely intellectual terms.<sup>211</sup> It is a tendency that, according to Richard Muller, is not supported by the evidence. He says “we must view Calvin as holding a nonspeculative, soteriological voluntarism that carries over

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<sup>207</sup> *ibid* p 549 (3.2.6)

<sup>208</sup> *ibid* p 551 (3.2.7)

<sup>209</sup> *ibid* p 580-582

<sup>210</sup> *CNTC* vol 6 p 228

<sup>211</sup> A primary example is RT Kendall, *Calvin and the English Calvinists*, (Carlisle: Paternoster 1997) see eg pp 19 & 28

into the language of faith.”<sup>212</sup> This view is endorsed by Barbara Pitkin in her major study of faith in Calvin’s thinking, *What Pure Eyes Could See*.

Faith is not sight but comes through hearing; it rests on God’s words of mercy in the gospel and so furnishes the remedy to the problem of ignorance and blindness, in the face of which human beings are both helpless and without excuse. Faith provides saving knowledge of God’s redemptive work in Christ, certainty in the word proclaiming this redemption, and a new perception that rises above carnal sense to grasp through the eye of faith the promised redemption that remains hidden to the eye of the flesh.<sup>213</sup>

While noting that Calvin does use the language of *cognitio* and *scientia* for faith, Muller points out that he is also prepared to call faith an *illuminatio*. But, he adds, “we find that these are balanced by an equally strong insistence on the assurance (*securitas*) that belongs to faith as faith addresses the human heart and passes beyond mere intellectual comprehension to grasp the whole person.”<sup>214</sup>

There has to be a movement from the mind to the heart, from the intellect to the will and affections, according to Calvin. “For the Word of God is not received by faith if it flits about in the top of the brain, but when it takes root in the depth of the heart.”<sup>215</sup> The certainty or assurance mentioned by Pitkin and Muller above is not necessarily absolute. It is, in fact, more of an ideal, according to Paul Helm; “what faith ought to be like.” He notes that when Calvin gives his definition of faith in the Institutes (3.2.7), he has already said that faith “is surrounded by error and unbelief.” And following the definition he suggests that “even

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<sup>212</sup> R Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* ((New York: Oxford University Press 1999) p 172

<sup>213</sup> B Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See*, (New York: Oxford University Press 1999) p 68

<sup>214</sup> R Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin* p 172

<sup>215</sup> *Inst* p 583 (3.2.36)



weak faith is real faith”<sup>216</sup> Examining these and other passages Helm concludes that, “what Calvin is setting forth is not so much an empirical claim in the form of a reportive decision, but an account of an attainable ideal.” Despite the impact of “prejudice and ignorance . . . the Spirit may convey a degree of certainty less than the highest, but even in the case of weak faith the Spirit may be operating authentically.”<sup>217</sup>

The Holy Spirit testifies to, authenticates the Word of God for Calvin; “writing” it on both the mind and heart of the believer, and engendering the response of trust in what is seen and heard in that Word. And it is soteric in its outcome, “it is the word of life, ‘converting souls . . . giving wisdom to little ones’.”<sup>218</sup> The next chapter will examine parts of that “testimony” to gain some understanding of what is revealed about God his identity and action.

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<sup>216</sup> Helm, *Calvin's Ideas* p 262

<sup>217</sup> *ibid* p 263

<sup>218</sup> *Inst* p 95 (1.9.3)

## **Chapter 5**

### **God - Identity, speech and action**

The main contention of this thesis is that there is no need to posit any disjunction between the doctrines of revelation and redemption. Not only can the organic link be seen between these doctrines in an important strand of the Christian tradition, exemplified by John Calvin, but also in the work of scholars both inside and outside of the tradition. The foregoing exploration of both biblical and theological studies, as well as the work of philosophers and communication theorists shows that the link between communication and relationship (the goal of redemptive activity) can be legitimately established. It is reasonable to maintain this link from both the point of view of God's design plan in creation, forming humanity in his own image, and from recent work in philosophy and theology concerning speech and action, especially the role and identity of the speaker. Further, the vital role of testimony has been examined and affirmed. In this final chapter attention will be given to the scriptural testimony itself via some key texts that bring together the major notions that have been considered; the identity of God, his speech and action. Old Testament scholarship has long debated two classic texts where these things come together, where God reveals his soteric identity through his speech and action to and on behalf of Israel. These texts, Exodus 3 and 6, have commonly been called "The Revelation of the Divine Name". These will be examined in their immediate and wider context and then some brief New Testament soundings will be taken to determine if their testimony is reflected more widely in the Christian canon.

First something needs to be said concerning the approach being used, which is concerned with the testimony of the OT itself, of understanding the testimony concerning Israel's

experience of God and his self-testimony on its own terms; an approach that can be characterised as the *emic road to knowledge*.<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Pike, who originally coined the terms “emic” and “etic”, describes his adoption of them as follows:

In studying an unknown language, the linguist must crack its code. He must find and learn to recognize and use the units of speech which allow the native speaker to understand and be understood, to act and react appropriately; he must learn to recognize and utilize units from an insider’s view.<sup>2</sup>

The units of sound in a language system are called *phonemes*, “each of them is *phonemic* in relation to that particular language,” from this he coined the term *emic*.<sup>3</sup> The term *etic* is derived from *phonetic* and “labels the point of view of the outsider as he tries to penetrate a system alien to him.”<sup>4</sup> The use of this terminology has been taken up and modified by other scholars especially in the fields of linguistics and anthropology.<sup>5</sup> One of the fundamental differences between the two perspectives is that the etic approach is the creation of the observer who, in linguistics, creates a “world-wide cross-cultural scheme” looking for universals or absolutes to apply across the discipline. “The emic structure of a particular [linguistic] system must . . . be discovered.”<sup>6</sup> In the reading of the Exodus narrative an emic approach is utilised to discover what is being said and to read it, as far as possible, from a “mutual cognitive environment,”<sup>7</sup> in order to attend to what the original hearers understood. Another aspect of Pike’s use of the emic/etic distinction is that he works with the translators

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<sup>1</sup> This description is taken from the subtitle of Kenneth Pike’s book *Talk, Thought and Thing* Summer Institute of Linguistics 1993

<sup>2</sup> KL Pike, *Linguistic Concepts, An Introduction to Tagmemics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1982) p 44

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* pxii

<sup>5</sup> see eg TN Headland et al, *Emics and Etics, The Insider /Outsider Debate* (Newbury Park: Sage 1990) and R McCutcheon ed *The Insider /Outsider problem in The Study of religion* (London: Cassell 1999)

<sup>6</sup> KL Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behaviour* (The Hague: Mouton 1967) p38

<sup>7</sup> see Sperber *Relevance* (Oxford: Blackwell 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 1995) pp 38-46

who have to deal with languages that have no orthographical or formal grammar and are hitherto untranslated. Where there is “little or no written history”<sup>8</sup> an emic (and synchronic) approach must be taken. Although the Exodus texts examined obviously have a “written history”, they introduce elements of understanding for the first readers that need to be considered in a context of “newness”.

Kenneth Pike’s insistence that a linguist must learn an unknown language “from an insider’s view” has wider implications in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, especially in its emphasis on the personal involvement or commitment of the investigator. As has already been noted, the work of the Reformed Epistemologists has helped rehabilitate the personal element in knowing and also devalue the Enlightenment myth of pure objectivity. Another voice in this movement towards the personal is Michael Polanyi, who offers arguments that reinforce the value of the “emic road to knowledge”. His initial training was as a scientist and later in life he turned to philosophy. In his major work, *Personal Knowledge*, he states his purpose clearly; it “is to show that complete objectivity as usually attributed to the exact sciences is a delusion and is in fact a false ideal.”<sup>9</sup> One of his important arguments is that major scientific breakthroughs normally happen within the community of scientists, a community with shared values and beliefs concerning their subject. New developments are not the result of a new paradigm imposed from the outside, even if the breakthrough results in a new paradigm being formed. He sees this “insider” approach applying to other disciplines as well, including theology. He claims that, “[O]nly a Christian who stands in the service of his faith can understand Christian theology and only he can enter into the religious meaning of the Bible.”<sup>10</sup> A major implication of his argument is that it is not

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<sup>8</sup> Headland et al *Emics and Etics* p188

<sup>9</sup> M Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1958) p18

<sup>10</sup> *ibid* p281

inappropriate to investigate, describe or assess Christian belief from “inside”, or in the case of this chapter, the experience and beliefs of Israel. The personal commitments of the investigator are not to be ignored, as they impact the outcome of the investigation. This approach to a subject or discipline is termed “conviviality”<sup>11</sup> by Polanyi and presents an additional case for an emic approach to knowledge. He wishes to place greater emphasis on personal involvement and commitment in the process of discovery and learning. He seeks to show at great length how acts of personal judgment and commitment are integral to the acquisition of new knowledge or the re-articulation of existing knowledge. Only some brief indications of his arguments can be given here.

If attention is focussed entirely on the explicit and logical aspects of knowing, this tends towards a static and closed system of knowledge. Polanyi observes that this, however, is not actually the case, knowledge of reality is growing and dynamic; and the formulations with which any understanding of reality is described are subject to restatement and reconstruction. A further departure in Polanyi’s method is the use of tactual rather than visual images to describe his views of perception. An example of this use would be driving a nail in with a hammer. The concentration or focus of attention is on the head of the nail; while there is only tacit awareness of the hammer in the hand. The master-craftsman may be said to indwell the hammer as it becomes virtually an extension of his hand; he is focally aware of the nail and its situation and use. This tacit awareness is an underlying component of knowledge in which other forms of perception and knowledge depend.

This tacit dimension provides the unifying ground of all knowledge, rooting it in concrete situations of life and society in the world; and as such provides the continuous epistemological field which integrates the sciences and the arts and does

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<sup>11</sup> See further below p285

away with the age-old dualisms which have led to the fragmentation of human culture.<sup>12</sup>

One such dualism is the separation of belief and knowledge that, in John Locke and his successors, led to belief being reduced to the expression of subjectivity, while knowledge was that which is objectively demonstrable. Now, Polanyi claims, belief must be recognised “as a source of knowledge.”

Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework.<sup>13</sup>

Closely connected with this idea concerning the “fiduciary framework” are those of “conviviality”, participation in a community of shared tacit beliefs and convictions; and “connoisseurship”, the acquiring of a skill by example rather than precept. Both of these involve what Polanyi terms “indwelling”, that is the active participating and relating to the world of enquiry. This concept of indwelling is more akin to the process of “listening” rather than “seeing”. In a Polanyian observation, Walter Thorson says:

. . . the real importance of listening as an epistemological mode is the fundamental attitude it creates, for it places the maximum emphasis not upon my activities as knower but upon the objective Other towards which my knowing is directed. Seeing is self-centred, and it may become purely passive, a ‘spectator sport’; grasping and manipulating is indeed active, but may degenerate into mere self-expression. In an

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<sup>12</sup> TF Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press 1988) p 145

<sup>13</sup> M Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul 1962) p 266

attitude of ‘listening’, I am trying to ‘stand under’ what is there and to allow it to shape my knowing in response to it.<sup>14</sup>

This attentiveness to the “objective Other”, or, in Pike’s terms the “emic road to knowledge” is, in part, what is attempted in the examination of the texts from the book of Exodus that follows. This need not be done in complete disregard for the possibility of an etic perspective (the role that wider linguistic, historical and theological scholarship might play); it is, rather, to see these texts in their focal role for Israel and their understanding of God.

It was suggested earlier that the Exodus event and the narrative surrounding it are foundational in the life of the people of Israel, for it is here that their encounter with God is recorded – the God who reveals his soteric identity through his speech and action to and on behalf of Israel - that is, their experience is of God as Redeemer. In a brief commentary of an earlier generation, G Henton-Davies suggested that “the book of Exodus is above all else in the Old Testament the book of the Presence of the Lord.”<sup>15</sup> Whatever outward manifestation it took, whether in providence, revelation or redemption, it all had to be related to the “personal presence of the Lord.”<sup>16</sup> Central to this theme stands the predication “I am the Lord”; and according to Henton-Davies this predication is absolute. To the objection that this understanding is too metaphysical for the writer of Exodus, he replies, “[T]he problem for the exegete is not whether Israel could think metaphysically but whether the exegete himself can experience theocentrically. What matters is the absolute form of the

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<sup>14</sup> W Thorson “Scientific objectivity on the listening attitude” in P Helm ed *Objective Knowledge – A Christian Perspective* (Leicester: IVP 1987) p 77

<sup>15</sup> G Henton-Davies, *Exodus* (London: SCM Press 1967) p 48

<sup>16</sup> Henton-Davies, p 48

predication and that corresponded exactly to their experience.”<sup>17</sup> This self-predication of YHWH lies at the heart of Israel’s theocentric understanding, indeed of their life as a whole. Commenting on God’s revelation of himself to Moses in Ex 34:6-7, Calvin says,

Here let us observe that his eternity and self-existence are announced by that name twice repeated. Thereupon his powers are mentioned, by which he is shown to us not as he is in himself, but as he is towards us: so that this recognition of him consists more in living experience than in vain high-flown speculation.<sup>18</sup>

On the basis of this statement, Colin Gunton criticizes Calvin for implying that God, in his essence, cannot be known. The issue is for Gunton that “if God’s self-revelation is not of himself as he is in his eternal triune love, is there not a danger that a wedge has been inserted, so that the revelation of God in act is subverted by foreign accounts of his being?”<sup>19</sup> This criticism is open to dispute, as Calvin may simply be exercising caution in order to avoid attributing to God anything that God himself has not revealed in his words and actions.<sup>20</sup> Both Calvin and Gunton hold in common an approach to the knowledge of God and his perfections – that is, that they *can* be known through God’s actions. One of the main contentions of Gunton in his book *Act and Being* is that the character of God, and in particular his attributes, have often been described in abstract concepts that do not accord with the testimony of Scripture. In Gunton’s view, utilising a metaphysic inherited from Greece has meant that the movement has been from this world and human experience to the characteristics of God, an ascent that means God’s attributes are seen as absolutes of human attributes.

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid* p 49

<sup>18</sup> *Inst* p 97 (1.10.2)

<sup>19</sup> C Gunton, *Act and Being* (London: SCM Press 2002) p 87

<sup>20</sup> See further on this, P Helm *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004) pp 11-34



This should not necessarily lead to a denial of the role of metaphysics altogether, yet there are some problems to be faced. It is clear, for example, what the kind of questions are that should be addressed by a metaphysician – concerning the nature, origin and purpose of the world and the place of people within it – there is, however, no consensus concerning the answers to these questions. Peter van Inwagen describes this lack of consensus in the following way:

In the end we must confess that we have no idea why there is no established body of metaphysical results. It cannot be denied that this is a fact however. . . . One of its implications is that neither the author of this book nor your instructor . . . is in a position in relation to you that is like the author of your text (or your instructor) in geology, tax law or music theory. All these people will be masters of a certain body of knowledge, and, on many matters if you disagree with them you will simply be wrong. In metaphysics, however, you are perfectly free to disagree with anything the acknowledged experts say – other than their assertions about what philosophers have said in the past or are saying the present.<sup>21</sup>

It is no surprise, therefore, that, in the light of this kind of uncertainty, David Bentley Hart comments that his use of the terms metaphysics will have a “spacious array of connotations” and the reason for this is, “not because it is particularly rich in meanings, but because it is a word to which neither any stable, not any very useful, meaning can be assigned.”<sup>22</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup> P van Inwagen, *Metaphysics* (Philadelphia: Westview Press 2009) p 15. For his version of the basic questions of metaphysics see pp 4-6

<sup>22</sup> D Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2003) p 8. A consensus is not necessarily a positive thing in his view, As he says (p 9), “the unity of metaphysics is a convenient fiction, a way to exclude other voices, other ways of naming the difference of being from being or the relation of the one to the many.”

highlighting of this lack of consensus is not to deny or denigrate work that has been done in this area. There have been acknowledged experts (from at least Plato onwards) and the formulation of constructive content within the discipline. What has not happened is that there has not been unanimity; competing views have been put forward as reasonable alternatives. It is in this arena that a description of “things as they really are” based on the Hebrew Scriptures and Apostolic testimony can also be constructed and offered as a reasonable alternative to other views.<sup>23</sup>

Colin Gunton makes a similar point to this as he considers the divine attributes in *Act and Being*. In the opening chapter he argues for an approach that is based on an examination of the testimony concerning God and especially the names used in the Old Testament. Following a brief examination of the “Burning Bush” story and God’s declaration of his name, he comments on the way that John of Damascus interprets the passage in terms of Being, rather than in terms of relationship and action with and on behalf of Israel. According to Gunton this kind of exegesis is “the basis of the tradition of negative theology, of naming God in terms of what he is not,” There is in his view, some justification for this in that human words will never be able to contain the totality of the being or essence of God. However Gunton goes on to say, “yet, to the sceptical observer John’s exposition seems to be more a piece of Platonic abstraction than a true exegesis of the biblical text.” Gunton observes that when this text is read in the wider context of Exodus the name that God gives is a description that will be “filled out in future historical acts.”<sup>24</sup> This conclusion, especially as it relates to the attributes of God made known through action, is

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<sup>23</sup> The term “reasonable” is being used here in approximately the same sense as “rational” is used in N B MacDonald, *Metaphysics and the God of Israel* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster 2006) pp xxi-xxiii.

<sup>24</sup> C Gunton, *Act and Being* pp 10-11

endorsed by Christopher Schwobel, who sees the personal attributes of God (for example his love, righteousness, faithfulness etc) as intentional actions, and,

Insofar as they describe the fundamental patterns of the intentional actions of a personal agent these personal attributes can also be predicated of the agent. The description of an action, of a pattern of activity and of an agent as merciful or faithful is only possible if the action in question is part of a comprehensive policy or act which expresses the character of the agent. To talk of God's personal attributes seems therefore necessarily correlated with the model of intentional, and that is personal action.<sup>25</sup>

The tendency exhibited by John of Damascus and shown throughout the history of Christian thought, to dwell on the manifestation of the "burning bush" and not on the words that were spoken, has produced a number of versions of the concept of aseity. Without denying that the event as it is recorded in Exodus 3 suggests that God is self-sufficient (the presence of God in the flame does not consume the bush, the fire does not need fuel), to only build a concept of aseity from the incident is to ignore its position in the narrative flow of the text.<sup>26</sup> The comment of John Webster, though not directly related to this text, is pertinent here. "God is . . . enacting a particular identity, presenting himself to us as a specific gestalt, and so making himself perceptible, intelligible and nameable." Rather than a negative concept, aseity is "a positive or material concept" and "[I]ts content is governed by those acts in which God enacts his being before us and to give himself to be known."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> C Schwobel, *God, Action and Revelation*, (Kock: Pharos Publishing, 1992) pp 51&52.

<sup>26</sup> see below for more on this incident

<sup>27</sup> J Webster, 'God's Aseity' in *Realism and Religion* ed A Moore & M Scott (Aldershot: Ashgate 2007) p 148

There is a further problem that has often arisen when stress is laid on the actions of God in and through the history of Israel and in the incarnation. That problem revolves around how that action is to be understood and most often occurs when a wedge is driven between the action and the speech of God. A classic example of this is to be found in the words of Archbishop William Temple who argued that understanding the action of God is to be achieved by a process, one that is superintended by God, but is subjective, the inward experience of an individual. There is, for Temple, “the coincidence of event and appreciation: that is the activity of God can only be discerned by an inward experience.” This “revelation is chiefly given in objective fact, yet it becomes effectively revelatory only when that fact is apprehended by a mind qualified to appreciate it.”<sup>28</sup> It would seem, for Temple, that the action does not necessarily convey its own meaning and that the action or event will only yield its meaning to the prepared mind. It is, of course, a common experience that uninterpreted or unexplained events often remain opaque, open to a variety of meanings. None of these meanings need necessarily represent the motive or intention of the one performing the action. The “objective fact” is at the mercy of the mind(s) “qualified to appreciate it.” The reliance on the individual’s perception or construction of the meaning of an event will always be open to a slide into subjectivity. Paul Minear posed this particular problem in a graphic way many years ago, when he asked concerning the crucifixion of Jesus, “How could a bystander in Jerusalem, watching one of the innumerable executions beyond the city wall, detect that this *scene* was one decisive for all human history?”<sup>29</sup>

A further example of the presumed gulf between the actions and speech of God is found in the Biblical Theology movement of the beginning of the 1950s. One of the chief architects of that movement was G.E. Wright whose book, *The God who Acts*, was highly influential.

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<sup>28</sup> W Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan 1940) p 318

<sup>29</sup> P Minear, *Eyes of Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1946) p 142

Wright's view does not differ substantially from that of Temple when he writes that people today (1952) "insist that facts should be verifiable." This, however, is not the case in biblical history, where "the primary meaning seen in events, and many matters which are considered events, are not verifiable." How then do these meanings relate to the events? According to Wright they are a "projection of faith into facts which is then considered as the revelation of the true meaning of the facts."<sup>30</sup> In other words, to quote a programmatic statement of the book, "history is the chief medium of revelation."<sup>31</sup> There is rarely any clear acknowledgment that Scripture testifies to both the action and the speech of God as being integrated, offering meaning to the events that occur. It is at this point that the movement has been vulnerable to criticism for ignoring Scripture's own testimony and insisting that the "facts" are simply subject to human interpretation – that it is purely a matter of "history interpreted by faith,"<sup>32</sup> Amongst the most trenchant critics of the Biblical Theology movement has been James Barr and two examples of his criticism make clear his disagreement. He considers the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, where the focus is not directly on the recounting of history. Here he says, "it is known that God may and does act in human affairs," but it is clear that "there is no impression that any particular series of historical acts are the sole or even the central foundation for all knowledge of him." This is not a situation unique to Wisdom; a consideration of the Book of Psalms, especially where there is a connection with the cult, will show that "God indeed acts in history, but there is no reason to talk as if this acting were the sole foundation of relations with God."<sup>33</sup> He further amplifies the connection between words and deeds, action and speech, when later he says,

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<sup>30</sup> GE Wright, *The God Who Acts* (London: SCM 1952) p117

<sup>31</sup> *ibid* p13

<sup>32</sup> *ibid* p 128

<sup>33</sup> J Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM Press 1966) pp72-73

The progression to the story is given not only by what God does but also by what he says. Indeed, yet more, there is no progression given by God's deeds and sayings alone but only one when both of these are combined with the sayings and deeds of men. It is possible to make a chain of things done by God, and regard the sayings attributed to him as human meditation upon the things done. If we do this, we should be frank that it is also a modern rationalizing device, which departs from the form, and therefore from the spirit of the literature itself.<sup>34</sup>

Commenting on this rationalising device, he says that it “has more serious consequences than at first appears, for it damages the picture of the personal God of the Bible.”<sup>35</sup> Barr's basic contention is that Scripture depicts God as both acting and speaking and to divide them or prioritise one over the other runs counter to its testimony. Or, as John Webster succinctly states it, “‘Work’ and ‘Word’ coinhere.”<sup>36</sup>

It will be shown below from the narrative concerning the “revelation of the divine name” that “word” and “work” are thoroughly interrelated. YHWH's words delineate the purpose he has for Israel, which will be worked out in the events of the Exodus, and his soteric identity that will also be confirmed by the same events. To ignore the speech of YHWH at this point is to render his actions as, at the very least opaque and, at worst, incomprehensible. Christopher Barth sums this up in the following way:

God revealed his name. He granted to Israel the favour of knowing, invoking, confessing, honouring and praising this name and believing in him . . . Israel

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid* p 21. For a further assessment of this false dichotomy between action and speech see, WJ Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1981) pp 79-90

<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

<sup>36</sup> J Webster, *Word and Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2001) p 66

does not praise the name as such, but the name as a pointer to the wonder-working God. The deeds of God, and especially the liberation from Egypt, ensure that his name is the name above all names. On the one hand, apart from the deeds, the name would be just one word among others. On the other hand, without the revelation of the name of him who did the deed, the wonderful events would have remained mute. In revealing his name, God speaks. It is by word and deed that God calls his people into being, whether in Israel or any other time and place.<sup>37</sup>

Scripture's testimony can be shown to draw the bond more tightly – God's words are deeds, his speech is action.

Returning to Henton-Davies' insight concerning God's presence in Exodus, one of the most recent commentaries on the book of Exodus also emphasises the same theme. Thomas Dozeman divides the material of the book into two main sections, "The Power of YHWH" (1:1-15:21) and "The Presence of YHWH" (15:22-40:28). The first half of the book clearly does not exclude the idea of presence, however, and other themes such as the identity and activity of YHWH are on view. Dozeman suggests that in the first part of the narrative it is the "nature of divine power that takes centre stage."<sup>38</sup> The second part of the book shows YHWH with his people, acting for them, promising his dwelling among them (particularly in the Promised Land), the people jeopardising the relationship with YHWH and finally the construction of the tabernacle with YHWH "filling" it with his presence. This same theme, of YHWH's presence, has occupied the attention of commentators throughout the forty or

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<sup>37</sup> C Barth, *God with Us* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1991) pp 72-73

<sup>38</sup> TB Dozeman, *Exodus*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2009) p 45

more years between these two authors.<sup>39</sup> Attention is given in this chapter to two classic loci concerning the identity, speech and action of YHWH. There are the two passages that are commonly referred to as ‘The Revelation of the Divine Name’, Exodus 3:1-15 and 6:2-9. While conscious of the long history of the use of divine names in identifying and systematising the sources of the Pentateuch, it is with the final form of the text that this study will chiefly deal, only where necessary highlighting the particular nature and emphasis of a putative source.

### **The Identity of YHWH – Exodus 3:1-15**

The Literary context of the story of the “Burning Bush” and the self-revelation of God is carefully constructed and introduces a tension which is only relieved by the theophany of Exodus 3. The narrative of the first two chapters is marked by the “absence of God”, a theme highlighted in many commentaries.<sup>40</sup> The people who have descended from Jacob have become very numerous and, in the minds of the leaders of Egypt, pose a threat to national security. Through a range of increasingly harsh measures Pharaoh seeks to suppress that threat. From Ex 1:1 to 2:22 there are few references to God and these are in the story of the midwives who seek to thwart the purpose of Pharaoh. According to Donald Gowan this is to acknowledge “that popular piety had not yet died out . . . that the activities of these good people helped the Israelites at that time,” but there is no claim in the text that “God himself intervened in this time of suffering.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> see for example BS Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1974; GAF Knight, *Theology as Narration* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press 1976; J I Durham, *Exodus* (Waco: Word Books 1987); TE Fretheim, *Exodus* (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1994; C.Houtmann, *Exodus vols 1-3* (Peeters, 1993-2000); D K Stuart, *Exodus* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006

<sup>40</sup> see e.g. Durham, *Exodus* pp 13-17; Knight, pp 55- 56

<sup>41</sup> DE Gowan, *Theology in Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1994) p 2



In preparation for the theophany of chapter 3, the narrative indicates that there will be an intervention by God into the desperate situation of the Israelites (2:23-25). Here, as in the rest of the first two chapters the name YHWH is not used, although it had been used more than 100 times in Genesis. This is one way in which the significance of the revelation of the divine name is given a sharper focus.

Before reviewing the main elements and significance of this narrative, there are some preliminary issues that need to be considered. The first is the commonly used designation given to this story of “the revelation of the divine name”. Although this seems an obvious title for this passage it does not necessarily give an accurate summation of its contents. As will be seen below, the narrative is not concerned with an initial revelation of God, or with the first use of a particular name of God; it serves a different function. Where that descriptor is used of the narrative in this study, it does not imply a wholly new moment in the history of God’s dealing with Israel. Second, this passage is also referred to as the “call of Moses”. The call or commission of Moses is certainly an element within the narrative but, following Thomas Dozeman, emphasis will be placed on the identity of YHWH.<sup>42</sup> The third issue concerns the sources of the narrative. Different commentators and source critics analyse the sources in different ways. As Christopher Seitz observes, “There have always been problems with source-critical division at the level of individual texts and in terms of larger conceptuality, and there is a growing literature whose sole purpose is to point out these problems.”<sup>43</sup> As has already been stated, this study is concerned with the final form of the

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<sup>42</sup> see Dozeman pp120 & 121

<sup>43</sup> C Seitz, *Word without End* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998) p 230. See for example, R Rendorff, *The Problem of the Transmission in the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990); R N Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987); I Knoll, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993), R W L Moberly, *The Old*

text because, even if it is a composite account, it “is a far more significant key to the intention of the book of Exodus than the separate sources could ever be, even if we could reconstruct them completely.”<sup>44</sup>

There is a general consensus amongst commentators that Exodus 3:1-15 is a literary unit in a wider section of the book (often deemed to be 3:1-4:19, though Houtman begins the section at 2:23). It has been recognised as having the standard form of a theophany account in the OT, which generally consist of ten component parts that unify and explain such accounts.<sup>45</sup> This smaller unit will be considered in four sections that provide a convenient delineation of the main themes contained within it.

**Exodus 3:1-6.** These verses reintroduce Moses and describe the way he is initially confronted by God. If the narratives that have gone before speak of the absence and silence of God and have hinted at the fact that there remains some hope even in a desperate situation, that silence and delay is about to be broken. The man who is “an alien residing in a foreign land” (Ex 2:22) is about to receive a commission from God. The people who cry out in desperation are heard by God on the basis of his covenant relationship with them (Ex 2:23-25).

The opening verse contains elements that further increase the tension of the narrative. If Moses, in search of pasture for the flocks of his father-in-law, has strayed beyond the natural bounds of Midianite territory and has reached the “mountain of God”, then the first readers’ expectations are aroused. They would be conscious of the significance of this

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*Testament of the Old Testament*, Fortress Press); 1992; D J A Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1997)

<sup>44</sup> Durham, *Exodus* p36

<sup>45</sup> For more details see J K Kuntz, *The Self-Revelation of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1968); T W Mann, *Divine Presence and Guidance in Israelite tradition* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press 1997) and JJ Niehaus, *God at Sinai* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1995)

location even if, in the story, Moses is not. There is already an anticipation of the possibility of a confrontation with God. Ex 3:2 begins to satisfy that expectation in announcing the very confrontation that is anticipated. The identity of God becomes apparent from the outset and central to this literary unit. First, there is the “angel of the LORD” and then there is the bush with a flame which does not consume it. Both of these are indicative of the presences of YHWH. Many English versions translate מלאך יהוה as “angel of the LORD”, but the Hebrew text is more ambiguous. The two words can be considered to be in apposition and therefore, the translation “Messenger of YHWH” or “Messenger YHWH” is perfectly appropriate. In keeping with many other places in the OT the significance of this is that there is little or no distinction intended between the ‘Messenger/Angel and YHWH. Douglas Stuart comments,

A useful analogy is found in the well-known expression *nehar perat*, [the] River Euphrates, also an appositional construct in which the second noun is intrinsically definite by reason of being a proper noun. Consider the nature of the River Euphrates: it is not *a* river or *of* Euphrates, rather, all of [the] Euphrates was the river, that is the River Euphrates or [the] Euphrates River.<sup>46</sup>

There are a number of places in the Pentateuch where this ambiguity is apparent (eg Gen 16:7-14, 31:11-13; 48:15-16; Ex 23:20-23) but a common theme is that the Angel/YHWH is present to rescue or fight for the people. The “burning bush”, which is not consumed by the flame, is also a clear indicator of the presence of YHWH. This theophanic fire is a frequent symbol of God’s presence in the OT. Durham points out that the “endless conjectures about the nature of the bush . . . are pointless . . . What is important is the nature of the fire as theophanic fire.” Its importance is underlined by five direct or indirect references to it in Ex

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<sup>46</sup> Stuart, *Exodus* p 111. See also Dozeman, *Exodus* p 125

3:2&3.<sup>47</sup> It may be possible to suggest, as Dozeman does, that the bush “provides an allusion to the sacred site of Sinai. The Hebrew word for “bush” (*saneh*) employs the same consonants, *s* and *n*, as in the word Sinai (*sinay*) suggesting at the very least a word play.”<sup>48</sup> The remainder of this section is basically a clarification of the theophany. In vv 4 and 5 there is a heightening of the theme of YHWH’s presence. The God who is present speaks, and the doubling of the name is used to intensify the call to Moses (and possibly show some affection). The command to “come no closer” (v5) is the verb קָרַב, “approach”, which is often used in sacred or cultic contents throughout the OT. “Finally, in the ultimate certification of a theophanic site, a place where God is present, Moses is told that he stands now on holy ground, and so must remove his shoes in reverence.”<sup>49</sup> If God is present, because of the various manifestations and indicators that have been observed in the text, there is no doubt as to the identity of this God (v6). This God is both the God of Moses family and the God of nation. It is also equally clear that YHWH, the speaking God (v4), is also the God of promises to the Patriarchs. “The God who reveals himself is no unknown God, but the same the book of Genesis talks about. His deeds are characterised by continuity (cf.2:24f).”<sup>50</sup>

**Exodus 3:7&8.** Within the pattern of theophany accounts observed in the OT, there are two elements that are contained in these verses: an assurance, or a pre-empting of human fear and the assertion of the divine presence.<sup>51</sup> The text clearly emphasises that this is achieved through YHWH speaking, “And he said . . . Then he said . . . He said further” (3:4,5&6).

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<sup>47</sup> Durham, *Exodus* p31

<sup>48</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus* p 124

<sup>49</sup> Durham, *Exodus* p 31

<sup>50</sup> Houtman, *Exodus* p 350. This connection with the book of Genesis is picked up by other commentators, see eg. Dozeman, *Exodus* p126 for the link with the Jacob story Gen 46:1-5

<sup>51</sup> see Niehaus, *God at Sinai* pp 185-189

Verse 7 opens in a similar way, and offers the assurance that YHWH has “heard their cry”. The threefold statement of God’s awareness of the situation of those who are now called “my people” for the first time, emphatically underlines God’s care for them. It also provokes, at this point, a response from God that is signalled by action on their behalf – “I have come down to deliver them” (v8). While the land from which they will be delivered, Egypt, is only mentioned once, the land to which they will go is mentioned in three different ways. First, it is described in a way that contrasts with the preset confinement of the people in Egypt. Second, it is seen in the hyperbolic description of a place “flowing with milk and honey”. Finally, it is described as a land capable of supporting several nations, which serves to underline its spaciousness and productivity. As Dozeman rightly says, the emphasis of vv 7&8 should be seen to be “on the promise of the land of Canaan as the goal of the divine rescue.”<sup>52</sup>

**Exodus 3:9-12.** The revelation of YHWH’s intention for the people is followed by a restatement of the grounds for action and the action itself. Dozeman, following Greenberg and Blum, identifies the formulaic way this is expressed elsewhere in the OT (Joshua 14:6-12 & 2 Samuel 7:27-29). The key link between the three elements (revelation, grounds for action and the action) is the expression ועתה, “and now”. This appears in Exodus chapter 3 at the beginning of both v9 and v10 in Hebrew.<sup>53</sup> To reach the Promised Land, the people must first leave Egypt and Moses is called to be instrumental in this. The task of “bringing the people out” is mentioned in vvs 10, 11, and 12. If YHWH’s identity has become clearer through this passage, it is tempting to think that, at this point, Moses has doubts about his

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<sup>52</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus* p 128. See also W Brueggeman, *Old Testament Theology, An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 2008)

<sup>53</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus* p 130

own identity. Many interpreters choose to “psychologise” Moses’ reaction shown in his response, “Who am I?” It is best to see the response in the light of similar uses of this expression elsewhere in the OT. After a review of a number of examples Houtman comes to the following conclusion:

Here Moses protests that he is unworthy to carry out the ordered task. Is Moses genuinely daunted by the task set before him . . . or is there an implicit refusal to take on the task? The course of the dialogue, especially 4:13, inclines me to think that the latter is the case. Moses would rather not.<sup>54</sup>

YHWH’s emphatic “I will go with you” overrides Moses emphatic “Who am I?” It would seem that the latter is not the most pertinent factor in the release of the Israelites from Egypt. As the narrative unfolds there are another seven instances where Moses objects to the task set before him, in the majority of these cases there is reassurance or resolution of the stated problem by God. In these verses there is both a promise and a sign. The promise is the continuing presence of YHWH and the sign is that the mission will be accomplished, “you shall worship God on this mountain”(v12). It is probably best to consider both of these utterances as promises, that YHWH will be with Moses and that he and the people will come to this mountain to worship.<sup>55</sup> These words of promise will be effective from the beginning of Moses’ work until its climax when the whole people meet with God “on this mountain”. Both act as a reassurance to Moses even when, rather than arriving in a “land flowing with milk and honey”(v8), they have to travel through the wilderness with Sinai as their destination. Terence Fretheim offers a somewhat different explanation,

It will become clear to Moses that God has sent him only when all of this has been accomplished and Moses stands with all Israel (the ‘you’ is plural) and

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<sup>54</sup> Houtman, *Exodus* p 361

<sup>55</sup> cf. Dozeman, *Exodus* p 132 who describes the sign as a “divine prediction”.

serves God at the very place at which they are standing. God's assurance of being with Moses is as much as Moses can bear at this moment. But when these events have taken place God's presence will be seen to have been effective and Moses will know that it is indeed God who stands behind the commission.<sup>56</sup>

A further nuance to this approach to the "sign" of v 12 is offered by Christopher Seitz, who points out that there is a disjunction between Moses and the people. YHWH hears *their* cry and knows *their* sufferings (v7) and Moses is not directly associated with this people in v9. The distinction between Moses and the people is maintained in v10 when he is given his commission and he responds to it. "Only in verse 12 is the mutuality of the people and Moses and God revealed: 'when you bring forth *the people*, you shall serve God on this mountain'; *ta'abdun*, a plural form meaning Moses and the people, is adopted here for the first time in the narrative."<sup>57</sup>

**Exodus 3:13-15.** The central focus becomes, once more, the identity of YHWH and, as with many theophanic narratives, it is a human objection that provokes a divine response. Moses (v13) raises a possible (if hypothetical) question that might come from the Israelites when he goes to announce his mission on behalf of YHWH. The question, "What is his name?" has several layers of meaning, the most significant of which concerns the authority of Moses and the character or nature of YHWH. Some commentators assume that the question will be directed to Moses by the Israelites to ensure that he is the authorised agent of their God.<sup>58</sup> More important still is the recognition that a name in the ancient Semitic world "often carried more significance than an identification mark; it was considered to be

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<sup>56</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus* p 63. See also Childs pp 56-60 for a more comprehensive description of the alternative approaches to this verse.

<sup>57</sup> C Seitz, *Word without End* pp 236-237

<sup>58</sup> see *ibid* p 237

description of character . . . This is especially true with regard to God.”<sup>59</sup> If the question is asked, it might be because the Israelites want to know if this God has the capacity or potential to effect what he is promising.<sup>60</sup> In the event, as the narrative unfolds, the question is not asked. God does provide an answer, however, and that is found in the threefold response of verses 14 and 15.

The first of these three statements “I AM WHO I AM” (v14a) has been interpreted by some scholars as an enigmatic refusal and although there is a sense in which it cannot be seen as a complete answer to the question, it surely must be seen as *an* answer.<sup>61</sup> When taken in the context of the whole narrative, a clear and pertinent meaning to the ‘name’ emerges. God’s response – I am who I am (אֲנִי אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה) – comprises a double use of the Hebrew verb ‘to be’ (הָיָה). This verb has two main connotations. In the first place it speaks of existence and is translated by the English ‘be/become’. It is used secondly, to speak of something that happens, that takes place, and this is the more frequent use according to Michael Grisanti.<sup>62</sup> One of the clearest uses of the verb in this sense is seen in YHWH’s address to the prophets of the OT. The expression commonly translated in the English versions as “the word of the LORD came” (eg Jer 1:4; Ezek 6:1; Hosea 1:1 and a further 115 times in the OT) is in fact literally “the word of the LORD is/was”. While “word of the LORD” is often used as a “technical term for prophetic revelation, its juxtaposition with *hayah* indicates more than mere transmission of words from YHWH to his messenger,” it is rather, “his pledge that what he declares through his messenger will take place.”<sup>63</sup> Further evidence of the fact that *hayah* (הָיָה) is not simply a verb concerned with bare existence, but rather with active

<sup>59</sup> NIDOTTE vol 4 pp 149 & 150

<sup>60</sup> see Durham *Exodus* p 38

<sup>61</sup> Houtman, *Exodus* p 367 sees it as a refusal to answer. Fretheim, *Exodus* p 64 reckons this kind of interpretation is a “counsel of despair.”

<sup>62</sup> NIDOTTE vol 1. p 1023; most of the following information and statistics are taken from this article.

<sup>63</sup> NIDOTTE v 1 p 1024



presence, is seen in its uses with the “spirit of God” in the OT. In a similar way to its use with the “word of God”, most occurrences of the “spirit of God came to” have רוּחַ as the verb, particularly in the historical narratives (fifteen or more times including, Numbers 24:2, Judges 3:10, 11:29 and 1 Samuel 19:20 & 23). In all of these instances it is clear that the active presence of the Spirit of God is what is being signalled.

This latter meaning is the dominant one in Exodus 3:14, as is made clear by the context of that verse. YHWH is making a statement about both his intention and his active presence with Moses, with and on behalf of the people.<sup>64</sup> The section as a whole makes plain the soteriological intention of YHWH. The promise to the Patriarchs is the basis of both word and action at this point in the story (3:6) and the people’s need and their cry has been heard by YHWH. The urgency of the need is matched by the power of YHWH’s “expression: he has ‘come down’ that is from the place of his dwelling about the heavens to this place of his appearance to Moses, and he is about ‘to snatch’; his people forth from the grip of Egyptian power.”<sup>65</sup> Further in v12 there is an anticipation of the divine name – “I will be” (אֶהְיֶה) – and the assurance of YHWH’s presence to accomplish the mission under consideration this understanding continues to be maintained (see below, ‘The bridging narrative’). It is possible to summarise the statement by YHWH as follows, “I will be present to be whatever I need to be for you.”<sup>66</sup> As Christopher Seitz says, “God’s name is the most personal revelation of God’s own character and as such is not a proper name in the strict sense (like Jim or Sally) but a name appropriate to God’s character as God.”<sup>67</sup> For John Goldingay the giving of the name “is more like an open-ended promise. God has the capacity to be

<sup>64</sup> see Seitz, *Word without End* p 238 and Fretheim, *Exodus* p 61

<sup>65</sup> Durham, p 32

<sup>66</sup> I owe this paraphrase to a personal discussion of these verses and clarification of this issue with Dr D Ralph Davis, formerly Professor of OT at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi.

<sup>67</sup> Seitz, *Word without End* p 239

whatever Israel needs God to be. Whatever happens in the future, God will be there with Israel, and out of an infinitely resourced being, God will be what the situation requires.”<sup>68</sup>

The question of the significance of the name will be considered again later in this chapter. This initial consideration introduces something of the significance of the two other statements in vv14 and 15. The second part of YHWH’s response (v14) is to use the “name” as an assurance to Moses and authorisation of Moses to Israel – “I am/will be (אֲדִירָה) has sent me to you”. This may be part of a movement from personal revelation to Moses to public revelation to Israel, in order that they may know who YHWH is in relation to them.<sup>69</sup> It also functions to encourage and assure Moses of YHWH’s presence alongside his commission, and to authorise him in the eyes of the people. The final part of God’s response is to use the name YHWH and to link it directly to the Patriarchs. This God, YHWH, is also “the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (v15). YHWH is clearly associated with the verb “to be” (הָיָה), and it may be derived etymologically from the verb, or it may be a word play upon it.<sup>70</sup> While noting, “the etymology of YHWH is a matter of considerable scholarly dispute,” Houtman goes on to say that, “more important for exegesis than the scholarly etymology is what significance was attached to the name in Israel.”<sup>71</sup> In the three statements of YHWH to Moses, there is a progression, a logic that moves from a more intensive form of the name, to a contracted form and finally to what might be called a summary statement.

The statement, “I will be who I will be”, is sometimes considered to be a stylistic device often called paronomasia. De Vaux considers this to be incorrect in this present case.

<sup>68</sup> J. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology* vol 1 (IVP 2003) p337

<sup>69</sup> see Dozeman, *Exodus* p 132

<sup>70</sup> Childs, *Exodus* pp 60-80 has a full discussion of the different views on Ex 3:13-15

<sup>71</sup> Houtman, *Exodus* p 94

“Linguistically, paronomasia is the juxtaposition of words which, although they show a certain similarity, either etymologically or merely formal and external, do not have the same sense”.<sup>72</sup> The statement contains the “repeated uses of the same root with the same sense” and more importantly “the same verb in the same person” in both clauses.<sup>73</sup> He then reviews other texts where this kind of device is used. It can be used for something which is undetermined (see Ex 4:13, 16:23 1 Samuel 23:13 etc.) and that is sometimes assumed to be the case in Exodus 3:14. This would certainly support the case of those who argue that YHWH’s answer is evasive here. De Vaux argues, however, that an answer is given and that this is not how this formula is used. Indeed, “the same stylistic device can also express totality or intensity” and in common with a number of commentators he shows that it is comparable with texts such as Ex 33:19, Ezek 12:25 and 36:20.<sup>74</sup> The intensive form of v14a is then contracted in 14b to “I am”/“I will be” as the name of the sending God. Finally in v15 the name YHWH is used and this name is a summary of what has been said and implied before about the nature, the character and intention of God.<sup>75</sup>

YHWH, therefore, connotes the active soteriological identity of Israel’s God who is present to accomplish his purpose for them. Though all the details of YHWH’s character and purposes are not spelled out in this “personal name”, Israel’s experience of, and their future with, this God will give them its fuller meaning. The name reveals a God whose nature it is to be present with his people in their particular situation and need. Fretheim suggests that the name is,

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<sup>72</sup> R De Vaux in JR Porter & JI Durham *Proclamation and Presence* (London: SCM Press 1970) p 67

<sup>73</sup> *ibid* p 67

<sup>74</sup> *ibid* p 68. See also *NIDOTTE* p 1025, Childs p 69 and Durham p 40

<sup>75</sup> RWL Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992) makes a similar comment concerning the “compression” of the name in vv14 & 15

“... in essence: I will be God for you. The force is not simply that God is or that God is present but that God will be faithfully God for them. The use of the same verb form in 3:12; 4:12;15, (cf 6:7; 29:45) suggests this. God will be God with and for the people at all times and places. The formulation suggests a divine faithfulness to self. Wherever God is being God, God will be the kind of God God is. Israel need not be concerned about divine arbitrariness or capriciousness. God can be counted on to be who God is; God will be faithful. Israel’s own experience with God in its history will confirm the meaning of the name. Israel both understands its history from the name and the name from its history.”<sup>76</sup>

YHWH, the personal name of Israel’s God, is inextricably linked to the idea of covenant in this section, with the reference to the Patriarchs in relation to God at both the beginning (v6) and the end of the section (v15). It is in the outworking of the covenant relationship, especially the deliverance from Egypt and the events of Sinai, that Israel will come to a full understanding of the name YHWH. JA Motyer offers an illustration of this developing understanding from JRR Tolkein’s *The Lord of the Rings*; one of the characters, Treebeard, makes this observation, “My name is growing all the time, and I’ve lived a very long, long time, so my name is like a story. Real names tell you the story of the things they belong to.”<sup>77</sup> Although the emphasis in this section has been the use of the verb to connote active presence, obviously, this understanding does not rule out the other aspect of the verb that has been mentioned, that of existence. In this context, the one must presuppose the other – being present presupposes existence. Without building a complete metaphysical description

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<sup>76</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus* p 63

<sup>77</sup> JA Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, (Leicester:IVP, 2005) p 68.

of God from Exodus 3; there are, therefore, a number of features of the text that have metaphysical implications.

### **The Bridging Narrative**

Before turning to the second account of God's revelation of the divine name to Moses (Exodus 6:1-9), a brief review of the material that links the two accounts is necessary.

The editor/redactor has placed the two accounts in Exodus in a particular way and some understanding of the connection between the two needs to be attempted. It should be noted first that the initial revelation is part of larger section of narrative that is 3:1 to 4:19. This whole section deals with the self-manifestation of YHWH, the commission given to Moses and the various objections by Moses and responses given by YHWH. There is then a transitional section that dramatically heightens the seriousness of the issue at stake (4:20-31). The first confrontation with Pharaoh and its failure occupy the next section (5:1-6:1), ending with Moses' return and questioning of YHWH. The second "revelation of the divine name" is then recorded with a focus on the identity of YHWH (6:2-9).

**Exodus 3:16 – 4:19.** The section opens with YHWH's command to Moses to speak to the elders of Israel and he is to make clear that YHWH is their God and Moses is the commissioned agent of their God. There follows a clear statement of YHWH's intention and although, in essence, it repeats what has been said earlier to Moses, it contains a new element – the element of promise.<sup>78</sup> Instead of a simple statement of YHWH's intention that was delivered to Moses, it is now (vv16&17) restated as a promise to the people of Israel. The promise, however, will not be effected immediately. Moses is warned by YHWH that

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<sup>78</sup> This observation is made by Fretheim, *Exodus* p 66 & Dozeman, *Exodus* p 138

the request for Israel to go and worship will be resisted and only after the Egyptians have experienced the “wonders” (commonly used in terms of judgment) will the Israelites go free. Moses’ authority as the leader of the people is reinforced after his objection, as he is given signs to perform that will convince the Israelites (see 4:30-31). YHWH also repeats the promise of his presence with Moses using echoes of the divine name – “and I, I will be (אֲדִידָהּ) with you” (so vv 14&15 literally, as the “I” is emphatic in Hebrew). A further interesting element introduced here is the rebuff given by YHWH to Moses’ objection that he cannot speak well, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?” (4:11). YHWH, the God they are coming to know as Redeemer, is also Creator. Moses’ objection “evaporates before the reality of YHWH as the creator God.”<sup>79</sup> Despite this reassurance, Moses remains hesitant and YHWH provides for this situation by appointing Aaron, Moses brother, as both a companion and a “mouthpiece”. Finally Moses takes his leave of his father-in-law Jethro and with the assurance that “all those who were seeking your life are dead” (v19), the journey back to Egypt can begin.

**Exodus 4: 20-31.** This story of the journey through the wilderness back to Egypt focuses on “the family relationships of the hero, Moses,” according to Dozeman. “Moses has three different family relationships in Exodus. He is born of an Israelite family (2:1); he is adopted into the Egyptian family of Pharaoh (2:10) and he marries into the Midianite family of Jethro (2:21).”<sup>80</sup> All three relationships are evident in 4:18&19 and connected to the narrative in the rest of the section. Space cannot be given here to a full exegesis of the

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<sup>79</sup> Childs, *Exodus* p 78

<sup>80</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus* p 149

intriguing story of the divine attack on Moses and its resolution in 4:24-26.<sup>81</sup> The content of these three verses is of utmost significance, Moses is to authenticate his demand to Pharaoh – to let the people of Israel go – with the signs YHWH has given him. In the light of Pharaoh's recalcitrance, Moses is to issue the dire warning that "you refused to let him [Israel, YHWH's firstborn son] go; now I will kill your firstborn son." (4:23). It is a matter of "life and death."<sup>82</sup> The divine attack on Moses needs to be read in this light. Moses and his family are bound by kinship ties to Israel (Moses is the human agent in their rescue) but the threat that lies on the Egyptians is likewise a threat to this family because of the lack of circumcision. Dozeman explains the story in this way,

Zipporah plays the central role in the story rescuing the person under attack from God . . . During the night YHWH seeks to kill one of the male members of the family – it is unclear whether it is the son or Moses. The attack may represent YHWH's claim on the firstborn, or it may result from the absence of circumcision of either Moses or his son . . . the action of Zipporah as a rescuer suggests that Moses is the object of the divine attack since his salvation by women is a central theme in the opening chapter of Exodus.<sup>83</sup>

The language of these verses underscores the covenantal nature of the event; the word used for 'knife' is the common one for flint knives normally used for circumcision (צַר). Rather than using the verb 'to circumcise' (מָוַל) the verb is to 'to cut' (כָּרַת), which is most commonly used in the *establishment* of a covenant. Zipporah's action of circumcising her own son and touching Moses with the blood of the foreskin turns away the divine attack. It may be that neither Moses nor his son were circumcised as Houtman suggests and that both

<sup>81</sup> For detailed discussion see Childs, *Exodus* pp 95-101 & 103-104, Houtman, *Exodus* pp 432- 449

<sup>82</sup> The idea here is succinctly summed up in Seitz, *Word without End* p 240

<sup>83</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus* pp 154-155

need to be circumcised before Moses could be seen as fully committed and “totally dedicated to YHWH”.<sup>84</sup> The incident functions in the narrative at this point to emphasise the importance of the events that are about to unfold and their significance for both Israel and Egypt. “Whatever else the strange night attack means, it sets the proper life-or-death tone and foreshadows future manifestation of God’s design for Israel and Egypt,” according to Seitz and, “Moses has this on first hand experience.”<sup>85</sup> There are two major incidents in the book of Exodus where YHWH is cast in the role of the “destroyer,”<sup>86</sup> the present passage and in chapter 12, where the death of the firstborn is related. Both of these passages are concerned with YHWH’s relationship with the firstborn son and the issue of acceptance or rejection, life or death is resolved by the shedding of blood. Although earlier scholars saw this story as being placed in this context in a somewhat random manner, it is now recognised as playing its part in the narrative flow of this section of Exodus.

The section under consideration ends with Aaron joining Moses and their meeting with the elders of Israel. They are accepted in their role and the signs they have been given are believed. The stage is now set for their first confrontation with Pharaoh.

**Exodus 5:1-6:1.** This section forms a whole, with a single, major topic, that of the first confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh and its disastrous consequences for the Israelites. It contains a clear statement by Moses that the God who has called and commissioned him to this task is “the LORD our God” (5:3). This is in stark contrast to his earlier approach when he referred to YHWH as the “God of your ancestors” (3:13). An element in this section that must not be missed is the emphasis on knowing or not knowing YHWH (especially

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<sup>84</sup> Houtman, *Exodus* p 448

<sup>85</sup> Seitz, *Word without End* p 240

<sup>86</sup> The term is Dozeman’s, see *Exodus* p 156



Pharaoh's response in 5:2). This theme of the knowledge of YHWH becomes a dominant one throughout the narrative of the Exodus event. Pharaoh's statement (5:2), "Who is the LORD, that I should heed him . . . I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go." As pointed out by a number of commentators, this theme echoes through the subsequent narrative. In some form, the expression, "you shall know that I am YHWH", surfaces in the narrative until the Exodus is completed (see 7:5; 7:17; 8:10; 9:14 & 29; 10:2; 11:7; 14:4,18 and it is summed up in 14:31).<sup>87</sup> This narrative framework provides an appropriate setting for the declaration by YHWH about the meaning of the divine name, as will be shown later. The narrative as a whole deals with the interaction between Moses, Aaron and the elders of Israel on one side and Pharaoh (with his taskmasters implementing his decisions) on the other side. Every request from Moses is rejected by Pharaoh and the whole saga ends in apparent defeat with the Israelites turning against Moses and Aaron, because they feel that they are in a worse situation than before Moses came with news of their liberation (5:21). At this point Moses "returns" to YHWH and makes his complaint and once more is reassured of the divine purpose. Within this section there are a number of exegetical puzzles that are beyond the scope of this study but they have been addressed in many of the commentaries. The chief purpose of the overview of this section is to see how it fits within the literary structure of the final form of the text and how it prepares the ground for the "revelation of the divine name" that comes next in Exodus 6.

### **The Identity of YHWH revisited – Ex 6:2-9**

A most notable feature of this section is the repeated use of the expression "I am the LORD" (see vv 2,6,&8). It divides the material into two parts, the first looks principally to the past,

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<sup>87</sup> see Childs, *Exodus* p 105, Fretheim, *Exodus* p 86, Seitz, *Word without End* p 241

reflecting on YHWH's covenants with the Patriarchs. The second part reflects on those covenants and their imminent fulfilment.<sup>88</sup> Other ideas that are repeated in these verses are references to the covenant relationship (vv 4-8) and to the action of YHWH on Israel's behalf (vv 6&7, see also vv 11&13). John Durham's judgment concerning this passage as a whole is that,

The redactor who set these lines into their present context was not concerned with theophany. Indeed he was only a little concerned with the call of Moses and either less concerned or not concerned at all, with the moment of the revelation of the Tetragrammaton. His interest was in a special relationship, as old as the patriarchal fathers, as real as Israel's need in bondage . . . and as guaranteed as Israel's response to the active presence of God could make it. The authority for the relationship, first, last, from the past through future, was YHWH who Is. The demonstration of that authority was his mighty deeds, hinted at here and shortly to be described in detail.<sup>89</sup>

This view has the advantage of approaching the final text as a whole rather than isolating verse 3 in particular and constructing a theory concerning the divine name upon it.<sup>90</sup>

Walther Zimmerli has shown that the expression "I am the LORD" is a formula used as an introduction to YHWH's self-revelation and calls attention to the divine authority. It is often referred to as a recognition formula.<sup>91</sup> It is frequently used in pronouncements that indicate that YHWH is about to act in salvation for Israel – such as the case here. Confronted with Moses' complaint (5:22&23), YHWH responds with a statement of intention (6:1) and,

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<sup>88</sup> See B. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2007) pp 367-368. He suggests a chiasmic structure that emphasises this division and the focus on the LORD who acts for Israel. See also Fretheim, *Exodus* p 92

<sup>89</sup> Durham, *Exodus* p 76

<sup>90</sup> See Seitz, *Word without End* pp 241- 242 for why "Interpretation of this key unit has foundered."

<sup>91</sup> W. Zimmerli, *I am YHWH* (Louisville: John Knox Press 1982, pp 1-28. See also Dozeman, *Exodus* p 164, Seitz, *Word without End* p 243 and Waltke, *Old Testament Theology* p 368.

following the recognition formula, spells out the covenantal basis and nature of the action about to be taken (6: 2-8). Having announced both the divine intention and authority to act, YHWH makes a statement that has become a *crux interpretum* of modern scholarship: “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name ‘The LORD’ I did not make myself known to them”(6:3). The question at issue is whether or not the Patriarchs knew the name of YHWH and if Exodus 6 represents the first occurrence of the name historically even though it is used many times in the patriarchal narratives. Only a brief survey of the relevant data can be attempted here and an understanding put forward on the basis of a contextual reading.

In the first place a “slight syntactical problem” has to be addressed, as this “is frequently glossed over and which cannot be detected – because it is in some sense impossible to represent – in translations.”<sup>92</sup> Although the English translations most often include the preposition ‘by’ in the second half of the verse – “by my name the LORD” – there is no preposition in Hebrew. A preposition has to be added to maintain the English sense. The basic question is, which one? In the first half of the verse the preposition used – as El Shaddai – is commonly thought to be a *Beth Essentiae*; this can be translated by “as” or “in the capacity of”.<sup>93</sup> There would seem to be no clear grammatical reason why this preposition should not govern both parts of the verse. “It is not rare . . . for the preposition not to be repeated; such a construction is called a *preposition override* . . . In adjacent lines of poetry a preposition may govern an object in one line and by extension in the next.”<sup>94</sup> This opens up the possibility of expressing v 3 in the following way, “I showed myself to Abraham . . . in the character of El Shaddai, but in the character expressed by my name

<sup>92</sup> Seitz, *Word without End* p 242

<sup>93</sup> Houtman, *Exodus* p 500. See also *IHBS* p 198, emphasis in the original.

<sup>94</sup> *IHBS* pp 222 & 223. See also, Gesenius-Kautzsch, *Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1910) p 384, para 119, hh

Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.”<sup>95</sup> That is, God was known “in the capacity of El Shaddai” who made covenant promises to Abraham (see Gen 17:1ff), but not yet known fully as YHWH, the one who keeps and accomplishes these covenant promises. There is a contrast in this verse between the appearing of God as El Shaddai and knowing God as YHWH. The Hebrew verb “to know” (יָדַע) expresses a wide variety of ways knowledge is acquired and the form in which it is found. There is not the formal distinction in Hebrew that there is in other languages between “to know personally” and “to know that”, as there is in French (*connaître* and *savoir*) and German (*kennen* and *wissen*). “When used with an object, not the objective clause ‘to know that’, there is no divorce between the subject knowing and the object known; the known becomes internalised in the knower.”<sup>96</sup> It is in the imminent fulfilment of YHWH’s promises in the Exodus that Moses and the people will know, in terms of experience, the character of YHWH more fully. Childs summarises the passage in this way,

. . . if the context of the passage is taken seriously, it is apparent that the focus of the passage is not on the revelation of a new name. In fact, v.3 appears almost as a parenthesis. Rather the emphasis falls on the revelation of the character of God in the name of YHWH which affirms the promise made earlier to the Patriarch.<sup>97</sup>

It would seem that the ancestors of Israel called God YHWH but knew the divine character more under the name El Shaddai. At this point in the Exodus narrative it becomes clear that they will call on and know God as YHWH. The fuller meaning of this name and character will be spelled out in the Exodus event and is summarised in 6:4-8.

<sup>95</sup> JA Motyer, *The Revelation of the Divine Name* (London: Tyndale Press 1959) p 12

<sup>96</sup> Waltke, *Old Testament Theology* p 368

<sup>97</sup> Childs, *Exodus* p 113

The covenantal basis is made clear to Moses, when YHWH (vv 4 & 5) speaks of both “establishing” and “remembering” the covenant. Its fulfilment will be seen in “the land” and is because of YHWH’s compassion, having “heard” them and their “groaning”. Dozeman suggests that the idea in vvs 6-8 of YHWH’s salvation is marked by completeness. The number seven is used (particularly in the Priestly writings) to suggest this idea. The evidence that he addresses is from Genesis 1 and seven days of creation, Moses receiving instructions for the Tabernacle on the seventh day (Ex 24:15-18), the seven speeches of YHWH concerning the plans for the Tabernacle (Ex 25-31), etc.<sup>98</sup> The important note in each of the statements in vv 6-8 is that they are prefaced by YHWH saying “I am” or “I will”, recalling the recognition formula framing this part of the narrative. The distinctive idea, used for the first time in this narrative to describe YHWH’s action on behalf of Israel, is the idea of redemption. The term redeemer and the act of redemption are not uncommon ways to speak of the identity of YHWH in the Hebrew Scriptures. Of the forty or so references to YHWH as redeemer, over one third of them refer specifically to the Exodus, either as past historical act (eg Ps 74:2, 77:15-20) or where the past act is used as a model for future action (eg Is 43:1, 48:20, 51:11). The Exodus is seen as “the paradigmatic act of redemption.”<sup>99</sup>

On reflection, to give this passage and the earlier one the title, “the revelation of the divine name” is inadequate. It is not a question of the revealing of a new name, rather, it is concerned with an expanding understanding of the character and activity of YHWH. “The issue is not knowledge of the name *per se* but how God most fully makes himself known as YHWH.”<sup>100</sup> The two narratives taken together are an infolding of YHWH’s identity – this is

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<sup>98</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus* p169

<sup>99</sup> *NIDOTTE* vol 1 p 792

<sup>100</sup> Seitz, *Word without End* p 243

the name in which Moses is authorised to set about his task, this is the name the people will recognise – but only as the Exodus event unfolds will they all come to a clearer and deeper understanding of that identity, of who YHWH “is”.<sup>101</sup> Calvin, having rejected the argument of those who will not pronounce the name of YHWH, also rejects the idea that the name is simply a label; it has a much greater significance than that. He goes on to say, speaking of Israel as God’s Church – the congregation of God’s people – “Nor does God by ‘His Name’ in this passage mean syllable or letters, but the knowledge of His glory and majesty, which shone out more fully and more brightly in the redemption of His Church, than in the commencement of this in the covenant.”<sup>102</sup> An objection could possibly be raised at this point that there is too close a connection being made between the name and the identity of YHWH. This is a debate that has occurred over a long period of history as to whether or not a name can be “freighted” in such a way. Also, the question that can be raised specifically concerning the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures is, is this link consistent with their testimony concerning YHWH?

## **Name and Identity**

So far, the term “identity” has been used in a general way to speak about “who someone really is” and this will need to be given a clearer explanation below. The link between “name” and “identity” has also been presupposed in what has been said above; this needs clearer explanation and justification. The issue of deciding whether names are “labels” or “descriptions” has been debated over many centuries (indeed millennia). Stanley Grenz, in his survey of the debate, begins with Plato and the argument in *Cratylus* (360 BC) between

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<sup>101</sup> So Seitz, *Word without End* p 244 says “who God wishes to reveal himself as...will be made manifest in the deliverance of his people. ‘He is who he is’ in these events and as such makes himself known – fully rather than for the first time – as YHWH.”

<sup>102</sup> *CC Harmony* vol 1 pp 127-128

Hermogenes and Cratylus.<sup>103</sup> Each of the protagonists taking opposing viewpoints; Hermogenes argues that his name is no more than a convention, which was given without any real consideration of meaning. Cratylus, on the other hand, argues that Hermogenes was misnamed, because his nature and character does not agree with the name he was given (Son of Hermes – with the implication of wealth, power etc.). Socrates' contribution to this discussion is to offer a mediating position between the two. A more recent approach to this question is seen in the work of John Stuart Mill. Mill “differentiated between the ‘denotation’ and the ‘connotation’ of a term. By the former he meant the object(s) to which a particular term applies. The latter in contrast, is the meaning of the term, including the attributes that define it.”<sup>104</sup> For Mill, “proper names function in a purely denotative manner” and they are “but an unmeaning mark which we connect in our minds with the idea of an object, in order that whenever the mark meets our eyes or occurs to our thoughts we may think of that individual object.”<sup>105</sup> In more recent times the debate has been focussed in terms of what is often called the “direct reference view” and the “descriptivist view”. The former theory “postulate that proper names are directly linked to their bearers,” and are “merely . . . tags or labels for persons, places or things that they designate.” The latter “theorizes that a proper name can designate a person (or another unique entity) only via intermediate descriptive properties.”<sup>106</sup> A reaction to Mill came later in the work of Gottlob Frege, who rejected Mill's approach and laid the foundation for subsequent descriptive theories. He made a distinction between a name's referent (“the object that a name names”) and its sense (“the way in which the object is given by a name”). Frege's claim was that “two linguistic expressions can have the same reference but different senses.” Although

<sup>103</sup> S Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005) pp 271 – 280, the following comments on the whole debate rely on his analysis.

<sup>104</sup> *ibid* pp 273- 274

<sup>105</sup> *ibid* p 274

<sup>106</sup> *ibid* p 274

they may “differ in the way of presentation” they refer to the same object.<sup>107</sup> The most cited example, originally given by Frege, is that of the “morning star” and the “evening star”, both have the same referent, the planet Venus, but not the same sense. Looking at the two apparent identity claims – “The morning star is the morning star” and “The morning star is the evening star” – Frege saw a distinction between the two. “The former sentence conveys no information but is merely a case of the law of self identity . . . The latter, in contrast, is not merely a statement of identity, for it also imparts some information.”<sup>108</sup> There have been many developments, and refinements of this theory, including Bertrand Russell’s famous “On Denoting”.

There have been dissenting voices to the “descriptive theory” and a good deal of argument in favour of the “direct reference theory”. Saul Kripke had an important role in this debate, arguing against the work of Frege and others. His main point was that proper names are “rigid designators” in that they refer to the same individual in all possible worlds. Definitive descriptors, in contrast, are not “rigid”, for they can refer to different individuals depending on circumstances.<sup>109</sup> To overcome the problem of how the present use of a name is linked with a referent, a number of philosophers have proposed some kind of chain of previous uses of that name.<sup>110</sup> Every nuance of the debate does not need to be followed for the purpose of this study. An interesting and significant feature of it can be found in the work of Gareth Evans that does have some implications here. He agrees with Kripke that following the initial naming, there is an ongoing chain that links with further uses of the name. Moreover, “he adds that the information and beliefs associated with the use of the name are

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<sup>107</sup> *ibid* p 275

<sup>108</sup> *ibid* p 276

<sup>109</sup> *ibid* p 278

<sup>110</sup> see eg Kripke’s “chain of communication and Donnellan’s historical chain”, cited in *ibid* p 278



important as well.” He further makes that point that a name is established with regard to a particular referent within a community. As he develops his idea (“proper-name using practice”) in a later work, he puts forward the suggestions that within a community there are “producers” and “consumers”.

The former group consists of those who are involved in the initial naming as well as those who have direct dealing with the named person and use the name when speaking of that person . . . Producers also gather information about the person . . . Consumers, in contrast, are not directly acquainted with the person and therefore are not in a position to add new information about the person to the practice of using the name . . . consumers must be introduced into the proper naming practice. Yet their role in the continuing the practice eventually becomes what sustains it.<sup>111</sup>

On the basis of the summary of the debate over proper names, Grenz goes on to develop an understanding of the Trinity focussed on “The Ontology of the Divine Name”.<sup>112</sup> As valuable an enterprise as this can be, it is not the chief concern here. The issue that needs to be addressed is whether or not there is significance to be drawn from the divine name as it is expressed in the book of Exodus. In the light of the fact that many Christian thinkers have asserted that the name(s) of God are “inadequate to the task of naming the divine reality”, it needs to be re-asserted that, according to Exodus, God is not “wholly nameless.” Rather, “the biblical witness is not that the God of the Bible is unnamed, but that God is *self-named*”.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> *ibid* p 280

<sup>112</sup> The sub-title to chap.8 in *ibid* see pp 290ff

<sup>113</sup> *ibid* p 280, emphasis in the original

In broad terms, Old Testament theology has considered names to be expressive of the characteristics, the nature, of the bearer of the name. Although some have gone too far in this kind of attribution – Johannes Pedersen, for example, was prepared to speak of the name as the soul<sup>114</sup> – it is perfectly possible to argue on the basis of the OT witness that the name might act as a synonym, a symbol, for the whole person. For example, if the name of an individual or a nation is blotted out or cut off, that spells the end for them (see Dt 9:14, 29:20 and 2 Kings 14:27); if the name is not cut off, they are preserved (see Is 48:19; 56:5 and 66:22). Many scholars understand the self-naming of YHWH as being of the descriptivist type. Two quotations from contemporary OT scholars will suffice to make this point (although many more could be added). John Goldingay makes the following comment:

Like some other Hebrew names such as Abraham, the name YHWH is more than a mere label. It encapsulates something of the particular significance of the person . . . YHWH's name suggests that YHWH may or can or will be anything that is appropriate or needed, or that YHWH decides to be . . . It is more likely as open-ended promise . . . God will be here with Israel, and out of an infinitely resourced being, God will be what the situation requires.<sup>115</sup>

Brevard Childs, in summarizing his conclusions of the OT's understanding of the identity of God says that,

First the God of the Old Testament has a name by which he lets himself be known . . . He is not an impersonal force, a convenient symbol, or conglomerate of predicates, but has a personal name (YHWH) by which he is to be

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<sup>114</sup> J Pedersen, *Israel its Life and Culture* p 245, quoted in BW Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1999) p 49

<sup>115</sup> J Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, vol 1 Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP 2003) pp 336-337

worshipped (Ex 3:15) . . . Nevertheless God remains free in his self-revelation. Israel has no power over him because he has made known his name. Indeed the use of his name is carefully guarded (Ex 20:7). The content of his name is filled by what he does (Ex 3:14), and Israel experiences God's identity through revelation and not by clever discovery.<sup>116</sup>

The name of YHWH carries content concerning the identity of YHWH. A clarification of what is understood by the term "identity" is required.

The term identity has been used with a degree of consistency in recent theological writing. An examination of one example of this, by Dale Patrick, will help to clarify both the term itself and its link with the concept of naming.<sup>117</sup> He suggests four main components of identity:

1. "Species identity"; this is a broad category that marks out human beings, for example, as those who share "the physical, psychological, moral, intellectual traits of the human race."
2. "Individuality"; this narrows down the characteristics and gives greater depth to identity. So, the class characteristics of male or female, "Jewish, Hebrew-speaking, small-town peasant, economically independent," etc give a subject a more concrete and unique identity.
3. "A history"; for every individual there is a history, "every act we do and every experience we undergo belong to our essential being. One is for ever the person who did this and underwent that."

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<sup>116</sup> B Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pp 354-355

<sup>117</sup> The components of identity that follow are taken from D Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1981) pp 29-30. R Bauckham helpfully summarises a broad consensus in *Jesus and the God of Israel*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press 2008) p 6, n 9

4. “A name”; this “differentiates a person from others, intimates a history and evokes a sense of an indivisible ‘I’ which synthesises class and species characters.” These can be approached in reverse order, for the purposes of this study, as many of the earlier components are subsumed under the category of the “name”.

The meaning or significance of the name YHWH has already been examined, but more can be said in terms of identity and something has been said concerning the use of the preposition כִּי. It has been observed that grammatically this preposition is often used to express the idea “by which” a person knows someone or something (see Ps 41:11, Gen 15:8, 24:14 etc) when used with the verb “to know”.<sup>118</sup> When this preposition is attached to the idea of the name of someone in conjunction with the verb “to know”, the question is, is it a matter of direct reference or does it have a descriptivist quality? There are two clear occasions where this happens in Exodus, both occurring in chapter 33. Moses is concerned that he might have a guarantee of YHWH’s presence with him and he says, “Yet you have said, I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight” (33:12 [Heb v11]). YHWH’s response reiterates these words, “you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name” (33:17). JA Motyer comments that it “is impossible that this should be so attenuated in meaning as to signify merely that Yahweh is acquainted with the sound ‘Moses’ and has learned to make that sound in connection with a certain man.” This seems to be remote from both the content and the context of the narrative, so that he continues, “Such externality is unthinkable. To know by name means to have come into intimate and personal acquaintance with a person.”<sup>119</sup> This begins to point in a more descriptivist

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<sup>118</sup> Other examples given in Motyer, *Revelation of the Divine name* p 15.

<sup>119</sup> Motyer *Revelation* pp 15-16, see Dozeman’s comments p 728 and more generally *NIDOTTE* 4:146-151

direction, for if God is being revealed by the name YHWH and that entails both presence and relationship, the name has more import than simply a “tag” or “label”.

To pursue this further using Patrick’s taxonomy, the name “differentiates a person from others”, it introduces the element of uniqueness. This has already been indicated, in part, in the examination of the “name” given in 3:14&15. There it was noted that the form “I will be what I will be” is a stylistic device used to intensify the idea being expressed. In Exodus 33:19 this device is used specifically to make clear the identity, the character of YHWH. Here YHWH says, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” Again the context in which this statement by YHWH is placed is of great significance. Coming immediately after the wilderness rebellion and the golden calf incident, it makes a clear statement concerning the identity of YHWH. There has been a manifestation of YHWH’s holiness and wrath but there is also the assurance that grace and mercy are also components of the divine identity. William Ford’s conclusions concerning YHWH’s actions at the time of the plagues in Egypt are also pertinent at this point in the narrative. He suggests that God acts in a particular way to provoke a particular response.

This seeking of response is brought about by the sending of signs, which point beyond themselves and the giving of explanations . . . They are not simply explanations, but rather are designed to bring about a certain response, often changing the focus of the recipient.

This change of perceptions is often towards a more theocentric focus; and this theocentrism stands out as the reason for YHWH’s actions. Israel and Egypt will ‘know that I am YHWH’. . . However, when we look in detail at this focus on YHWH and his power it does not involve a disregard for the humans involved. Rather it is expressed in ways that give insight into what kind of God this is. This is a God who

shows signs of his power through restraint, and through salvation, as well as through plagues.<sup>120</sup>

YHWH is seen under the identity of a “judging yet forbearing, saving God,”<sup>121</sup> and this is the natural outworking of the relationship that exists between YHWH and the world, and most especially with Israel, the covenant people. The names of God reveal different aspects of the character of God that are manifest within history and in relationship to the people. Commenting on the changes of name, Dozeman says,

Yahweh is not a distinct God from El Shaddai according to P any more than El Shaddai was distinct from the Creator, Elohim, or Abraham was a different character from Abram. Rather the groaning of the Israelites under slave labor (2:23b-25; 6:5) has called forth a new aspect of the Creator God, Elohim, and the covenant God, El Shaddai, now signified by the name Yahweh whose characteristics are described in vv6-9.<sup>122</sup>

The Creator, Covenant God is now more fully seen and experienced by Israel in the saving, redeeming identity of YHWH. In both of these passages, where this further soteriological identity is made known, links are drawn to both the past and the present. YHWH has ‘a history’ and that is clearly seen in the references to the Patriarchs (3:6 & 15; 6:3 & 8). The faithfulness seen in past actions is also the basis for YHWH’s promises and actions in the future on behalf of Israel (3:15; 6:6-8). The “name”, therefore, presupposes the other elements of Patrick’s “taxonomy of identity” and gives that identity great specificity. To underline the importance and value of the “name” that has been given, later in the narrative the people of Israel are given a command concerning the way they reverence that name. The

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<sup>120</sup> WA Ford, *God Pharaoh and Moses*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006) p 214

<sup>121</sup> For this expression see N McDonald, *Metaphysics and the God of Israel* pp 124-127

<sup>122</sup> J Dozeman, *Exodus* pp 166-167

other elements of God's identity are not replaced or rejected, rather the narrative enters a new phrase as the nation of Israel is drawn into relationship with YHWH and his saving action on its behalf.

The identity under which God is now to be known, an identity encapsulated in the name YHWH, is seen in Exodus to be the durable, permanent, consistent identity of God. This is summed up in Ex 3:15 in the clause, "This is my name for ever," where "for ever" translates the Hebrew word **עלם**. The most frequent use of this word in the Hebrew Scriptures is to indicate a sense of permanency, of constancy; YHWH's intention is to be with Israel increasingly,<sup>123</sup> "for all generations" (3:15). The revelation of the name in Israel is not to satisfy intellectual curiosity "but to be celebrated in worship for ever."<sup>124</sup> Knowing and responding to the name of God is part of the relationship into which Israel is being drawn. To return to the comment of Brevard Childs on this topic:

He is not an impersonal force, a convenient symbol, or a conglomerate of predicates, but has a personal name (*YHWH*) by which he is to be worshipped (Ex. 3:15). . . . God remains free in his self-revelation. Israel has no power over him because he made known his name. Indeed the use of his name is carefully guarded (Ex. 20:7). The content of his name is filled by what he does (Ex. 3:14) and Israel experiences God's identity through revelation and not by clever discovery.<sup>125</sup>

In the context of the early chapters of Exodus the "revelation of the divine name" is not simply the declaration of a title, not even an act of self-revelation (although, it involves that as well) it is rather the moment when YHWH "comes down" (Ex 3:8). It is, through both speech and action (the two are inseparable), there is salvific intervention on behalf of the

<sup>123</sup> See *NIDOTTE* vol3 pp 345-351

<sup>124</sup> BS Childs, *Old Testament Theology in Canonical Context* (London: SCM Press 1985) p 41

<sup>125</sup> BS Childs, *Biblical Theology* p 355

people of his promise. Concerning YHWH's response to Moses in Ex 3:14, Francesca Aran Murphy says, "[S]ome have found the answer to be evasive, but the moment when God acts on his recollection of Israel is one of dialogue made deed, not word-games about Transcendence."<sup>126</sup>

Calvin succinctly sums up the main lines of thought concerning God's name and identity when he says:

The *name* of God, as I explain it, is here to be understood of the knowledge of the character and perfections of God in so far as he has made himself known to us. I do not approve of the subtle speculations of those who think the name of God means nothing else but God himself. It ought rather to be referred to the works and properties by which he is known, than to his essence.<sup>127</sup>

One again, Calvin is clearly intent on avoiding speculation and intent on basing his doctrine of God on what God has chosen to reveal. He does, however, see that revelation as truly showing the nature, the attributes of God. He can speak of God's self-existence and eternity in his commentary on Ex 3:14. There he suggests that the knowledge of God's name and its use is given "that our minds may be filled with admiration as often as his incomprehensible essence is mentioned."<sup>128</sup>

The words and works of God are often brought together in a single phrase – "the promises of God". Calvin's comment on Ex 3:8 ("I am come down to deliver them") is as follows:

He now more clearly announces his intention not only to relieve their present calamity but to fulfil the promise given to Abraham as to the possession of Canaan. He therefore marks the end of their deliverance, that they might enjoy the rest and

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<sup>126</sup> FA Murphy, *The Comedy of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2000)p 62

<sup>127</sup> CC vol 4 p 94

<sup>128</sup> CC vol 2 p 73



inheritance promised to them. It is a common manner of speaking to say, God descends to us when he actually puts forth his power and shows that he is near us; as much as to say that the Israelites would experience plainly that his help was at hand.<sup>129</sup>

God's presence (a significant theme in the book of Exodus) is apparent through God's speaking, and that presence is salvific. Elsewhere Calvin uses the concept of promise as a picture of salvation; where God speaks, "the chief part of the word consists of promises by which he adopts us and receives us as his own people."<sup>130</sup> A clear reason for the rescue of Israel, according to Calvin, is the previous promise of God to Abraham. And the word to Moses is to extend and particularise that promise. God makes himself known in his saving identity and does so through a word of effective promise. The nature of God, as the covenant-keeping God, is the guarantee, the personal backing, behind the speech-act of promising salvation (to put it in non-Calvinian terms). There is, therefore, an inextricable link between God's speaking and soteric action, between revelation and redemption.

## **A New Testament Perspective**

God's speaking, especially in terms of his saving identity, is not the province of the Old Testament alone. In Calvin's treatment of the two testaments in the *Institutes*, he argues that believers continue to be dependent on the promises of God in the same way that men and women did in Old Testament times. Paul, he says, "teaches that we have the same promises . . . as were given to the holy men of old," but there is both a present and a future aspect to those promises. As believers wait for their fulfilment "the Holy Spirit bids us rely upon the

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<sup>129</sup> CC vol 2 p 68

<sup>130</sup> CC vol 7 p 170

promises,” As the word of God is presented to people by the work of the Holy Spirit, Calvin can say “[W]e enjoy Christ only as we embrace Christ clad in his own promises.”<sup>131</sup> This could be summarized in the language of speech-act theory by saying that the propositional content of God’s illocutionary acts is used with the illocutionary force of a promise or commissive. This has a “happy” or “felicitous” outcome, because in this instance it has the personal backing of God in his power and trustworthiness. There is also a clear “direction of fit”, that is a world-to-words fit, a bringing about of a state of affairs that matches the words. Carl Trueman illustrates something of this in his observation on Calvin’s commentary on Hebrews. The key passage is:

The faith of Sarah lay in this that she judged God to be true and to be so in his promises. . . . we learn from this first that there is no faith without the word of God because we will not be persuaded of his truth until he has spoken. This single fact is quite sufficient to refute the comment of the sophists about implicit faith, for we must always hold to the interconnexion between the Word of God and our faith. Because faith is founded chiefly on the loving-kindness of God . . . not every Word is sufficient even though it comes from His mouth, but a promise is necessary as evidence of his favour. It is therefore said that Sarah judged God to be true because He had promised. This then, I say, is true faith, namely that which both hears God speaking and relies on His promise.<sup>132</sup>

Trueman makes two important observations on this passage from Calvin. The first is that “faith is a conscious human disposition that has a specific object and specific content, that is

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<sup>131</sup> *Inst* p 426 (2.9.3)

<sup>132</sup> *CNTC* vol 12 p 169. Trueman uses *CC* vol 22 pp 281-282

God's word."<sup>133</sup> This trust in the word of another "underscores the personal, relational nature of theology." And it "consists precisely in grasping God not as human beings speculate he is or should be but as he has manifested himself."<sup>134</sup> The second observation is that "faith has a specific object, that is God's promise." Further, a "promise . . . is by its very nature something that must involve an interpersonal relationship."<sup>135</sup> An important aspect of any promise, according to Trueman, is the promiser's intention and ability to deliver the thing promised. Concerning the case of Sarah's belief he says, "the promise is deemed trustworthy because the words of promise are themselves a revelation of who God is."<sup>136</sup> Trueman goes on to develop an argument that links the trustworthiness of God and the trustworthiness of Scripture and shows the intimate connection between the two in Calvin's mind. However, for the purposes of this study, his comments on Calvin's interpretation of Hebrews offer a way into a brief examination of God's speech and especially his promises in relation to salvation from a New Testament perspective. Hebrews has been chosen in the light of recent scholarly activity examining the way the book functions in particular.<sup>137</sup>

One of the most immediately striking things about "To the Hebrews"<sup>138</sup> is the number and use of Old Testament quotations. And the way these quotations are introduced is both different and significant. Paul, for example, normally uses some introductory formula such as "it is written" (Rom 1:17; 3:4,10; 9:33; 1Cor 1:31 etc), whereas "the author of Hebrews

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<sup>133</sup> CR Trueman, 'The God of Unconditional Promise', In P Helm and CR Trueman, *The Trustworthiness of God* (Leicester: Apollos 2002) p 176

<sup>134</sup> *ibid*

<sup>135</sup> *ibid*

<sup>136</sup> *ibid* p 177

<sup>137</sup> See the literature cited below

<sup>138</sup> Although English translations use the title "The Letter/Epistle to the Hebrews", the book is not in the standard epistolary form and is more frequently referred to as an exhortation or sermon. See eg. WL Lane, *Hebrews vol 1* (Dallas: Word Books 1991) pp lxix-lxxx, Attridge *Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1989) pp 13-21

never introduces a citation with a form of the verb *write*.”<sup>139</sup> What in fact the author does is “present the reader with approximately thirty-seven Old Testament quotations through which God continues to speak to his people in these days of eschatological fulfilment.”<sup>140</sup> For the writer of Hebrews, this word is “living and active” (4:12), it is performative, “the speakings of God in Hebrews are more than just declarations. They are performative words that “do” at the same time as they say.”<sup>141</sup> Harold Attridge says, “it is no surprise that Hebrews uses God’s act of speech as a vehicle for theological insights;”<sup>142</sup> but it is not just a voice from the past, it is also “a form of address, an expression of the living word of God.”<sup>143</sup>

If speaking is an action, it is, as has already been seen, a relationship-forming action. And, according to Attridge “[T]he focal point for Hebrews’ story of God’s relationship with humankind is Christ’s death.”<sup>144</sup> In his commentary on Hebrews 1:1-4 he amplifies this by saying:

God’s final address comes not through prophets but “through a Son” (ἐν υἱῷ). The expression, without a definite article, does not imply that there are many sons whom God could have chosen as revelation. Rather the term emphasises the exalted status of that final agent . . . God, moreover, speaks through his Son not only in word, but

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<sup>139</sup> PT O’Brien, ‘God as the Speaking God’ in AJ Kostenberger & RW Yarbrough eds *Understanding the Times* (Nottingham: Apollos 2011) p 198. He notes that even in Heb 10:7, the words “it is written” come *within* the quotation.

<sup>140</sup> *ibid*

<sup>141</sup> K Schenk, ‘God has Spoken’ in R Bauckham et al *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2009) p 323. See also the essay in the same volume by DJ Trier, ‘Speech Acts, Hearing Hearts and Other Senses: The Doctrine of Scripture Practiced in Hebrews’, pp 337-350

<sup>142</sup> H Attridge, “God in Hebrews” in R Bauckham, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, p 103.

<sup>143</sup> CR Koester, quoted in O’Brien, *Understanding the times* p199

<sup>144</sup> H Attridge, *Hebrews* p 39

in deed, in the entirety of the Christ event, providing for humanity atonement for sins and enduring covenant relationship.<sup>145</sup>

In these verses the truth of John Webster's dictum, quoted above, that "'Word' and 'Work' coinhere," is substantiated. It can also be claimed that here, "the writer presents Jesus as being God's word in human form, with his identity and activity giving definitive expression to God's verbally revealed identity and will."<sup>146</sup> To those who would see speech as something active and the written word of Scripture as lifeless, Geerhardus Vos makes the following comment with reference to Hebrews:

The speech is an organic, living process, a part and function of the speaking person, whereas the written communication is only a picture or symbol of the life-process it reproduces. But God's word, even when written, has this peculiarity that it retains the character of inspired, vitalized speech, opening up the depths of the divine mind and addressing itself in the most direct face-to-face way to the inner personality of the hearer. So vividly does the author realize this, that in a well-known passage it leads him to a formal personification of the *λογος του θεου* in which the attributes and activities are predicted [sic] of the word, belonging, strictly speaking to God Himself only in which a remarkable transition is made from the word to God as coordinate subjects in the same sentence [4:12-14] . . . God acts in and through his word, thus the word has the same power and effect that belong to God himself.<sup>147</sup>

Peter O'Brien shows that the message that is spoken centres on the redemptive work of Christ, and that the writer is concerned to show the uniqueness and finality of that work.

<sup>145</sup> H Attridge, "God in Hebrews" in R Bauckham, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, p 102.

<sup>146</sup> J Griffiths, 'The Word of God' in J Griffiths ed, *The Perfect Saviour* (Nottingham: IVP 2012) p17

<sup>147</sup> G Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburgh: P&R Publishing 1980) pp190-191.

I owe this reference to C Hill, 'God's Speech in these Last Days' in LG Tipton & JC Waddington, *Resurrection and Eschatology* (Phillipsburgh: P&R Publishing 2008) pp 222-223. The whole chapter is an illuminating discussion of the canon.

“God is the speaking God who announces the Gospel of salvation through the Lord Jesus and his evangelists, confirms it by signs and wonders, and summons men and women, including the author and his listeners, to be sharers in his heavenly calling.”<sup>148</sup> The writer uses an unusual word in 2:4 to underline the certainty of the testimony “declared by the Lord” (2:3 RSV) saying that at the same time God “also bore witness” (2:4 RSV). Here συνεπιμαρτυρουντος is used (the only occurrence in the Greek Bible) and Paul Ellingworth comments that “both prefixes are to be given their due weight: the witness of events accompanies (συν-) and adds to (επι-) the witness of words. The simple verb μαρτυρεω . . . always implies in Hebrews the witness of scripture.”<sup>149</sup> The message (declaration) of Jesus receives corroborating testimony from God to demonstrate the importance of “so great a salvation” (Heb 2:3). Through the whole course of the book, the hearers are encouraged, exhorted and warned; for the writer, God continues to speak with the aim of bringing many sons and daughters to glory (2:10). The response of the hearers is required “today” (eg 4:6-11) as the living and life-giving word is addressed to them. Once again with the thought that behind the testimony stands the person of the testifier, the writer of Hebrews can encourage his hearers to persevere, to neither waver nor doubt on the grounds of what God is saying. Calvin expresses it thus:

As the truth of God is unwavering, so likewise the faith which relies on him, if it is to be true, must be sure and above all doubt. This is πληροφορια, that is an undoubting conviction by which the godly mind resolves in itself that it is not right to call in question what God who cannot deceive or lie has spoken.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> PT O'Brien, *Understanding the Times*, p 203

<sup>149</sup> P Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* p 141

<sup>150</sup> *CNTC* vol 12 p 81

Peter O'Brien notes a number of characteristics of God's word as it is portrayed in Hebrews. It is clearly *personal*, addressed by God himself to those who live in "these last days" (1:2). It is also *performative*; God "effects what he *declares* he will do." The word of God is also *living* not just in the sense of active but also in the sense of being life-giving. Also "God's address to his people is a word that is *clear* and *trustworthy*." Finally it is a *spoken* word, even when it comes, in Hebrews, from the written Old Testament. As O'Brien says, "from the very first it was *written* – written in the Old Testament, and now written in Hebrews, the word of exhortation that was read out to the congregation and heard by them."<sup>151</sup>

The writer to Hebrews is well aware of the triune nature of the speaker/testifier, Old Testament texts are not only introduced as being spoken by God, but also being spoken by the Son and Spirit.<sup>152</sup> It is out of the triune identity of God as Saviour that the work of Christ, that redemption arises. In both the texts from Exodus that have been examined earlier and from this brief survey of the perspective given by Hebrews, revelation arises from the redemptive intention of God. He has "come down" to save his people, according to the Exodus narrative, and, according to Hebrews, in the Son the final word from God is spoken because of the finished work he has accomplished.

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<sup>151</sup> PT O'Brien, *Understanding the Times*, pp 215-216

<sup>152</sup> God speaking, see eg 1:7-8,13; 4:3; 8:8;etc. Christ speaking, see 2:12-13; 10:5. The Holy Spirit speaking, see 3:7; 10:15

## Conclusion

Warren Brown, writing from a background of psychology and psychiatry, enumerates the human capacities “that are significantly superior to those of our closest nonhuman fellows and are critical for personal relatedness,” and the first of these is language.<sup>1</sup> The significance of language, especially language in use, is acknowledged by practitioners of a number of disciplines for example, neuroscience, philosophy, pscycolingistics and others.<sup>2</sup> Brown is prepared to assert that “[T]he unique power of human language makes possible important dimensions of personal relatedness that could not exist independent of language.”<sup>3</sup> If these disciplines just mentioned can suggest a significance, if not a uniqueness, to human speaking, theology has its contribution to make as well.

At the human level there can be no personal relationship of any real substance without interpersonal communication. This communication is the means of mutual indwelling, a term which is pregnant with meaning in the discourse of both Polanyian philosophy and Christian theology. Building on Polanyi’s views, Esther Meek writes of indwelling as follows:

Indwelling . . . is the intimate relationship of interpersonal communion in knowing in which we penetrate, and view from within the yet-to-be-known, to the extent that we are able.<sup>4</sup>

It involves, in the words of David Broughton Knox, being other-person-centred.

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<sup>1</sup> WS Brown, “Cognitive Contributions to Soul” in WS Brown et al, *Whatever Happened to the Soul* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1998) p103. His development of the primacy of language is worked out in more detail on pp 104-108.

<sup>2</sup> see, S Pinker, *The Language Instinct*; M Midgley, *Beast and Man* (London: Routledge 1995); J Aitchison, *The Articulate Mammal*; C Kenneally, *The First Word* (New York: Viking 2007)

<sup>3</sup> WS Brown, “Cognitive Contributions to Soul” p107

<sup>4</sup> E Meek, *Loving to Know :Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene: Cascade 2011 p 462



There can be no trace of self-centredness in true personal relationship. The smallest degree of self-centredness diminishes the relationship. Complete self-centredness is the negation of any personal relationship. The complete absence of relationship between persons is hell.

Since God is *actus purus* (i.e., there is no mere potentiality in Him), His other-person-centredness is complete and active in conferring benefits on the other person all the time.<sup>5</sup>

Here, Knox raises the important issues of the mutual indwelling, or *perichoresis*, of the Trinity and proceeds to illustrate it from a number of places in the Gospel of John. The comment of John Frame is apposite here: “[R]emarkably, Jesus also compares the mutual indwelling of the members of the Trinity with (1) the dwelling of the divine persons in believers, and (2) the unity of believers with one another (John 17:21-23).”<sup>6</sup> There is a sense, then, in which the life and relationships of human beings can be said to image that of the Trinity.

The earlier discussion of Chapter 3 indicated that web of relationship in which humankind is placed by virtue of its creation in the image of God, and the role of speaking was identified as a major element both of the creation and maintenance of those relationships. When those relationships, with God, fellow human beings and the created order are broken down or distorted (again, principally through the agency of speech as in the narrative of the Fall) the possibility of restoration, of redemption, is created through promise, a speech act of God. However one might interpret the promise of God in Gen 3:15 (the so-called *proto evangelium*) the *locus classicus*, from a canonical perspective, is Gen 12:1-3 – the initial

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<sup>5</sup> DB Knox, *The Everlasting God* (Homebush: Lancer 1988) p 131

<sup>6</sup> J Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing 2002) p 694 n 12

promise to Abram. This promise, as has been shown, reflects the creative purposes of God. The essential elements of it reconfirm the basic intentions of God in terms of land (place), offspring (people) and blessing (relationship with God). And reception of this fundamental promise is seen as the only possible response. Calvin makes this clear when he comments on the restatement of this promise in Gen 15:1-6, clarifying both the significance for Abram and for all believers:

God does not promise to his servant this or the other thing only . . . but he declares, that He will be propitious to him, and confirms him in the confidence of safety, by relying in His protection and His grace . . . It is, indeed, to be maintained as an axiom, that all the promises of God made to the faithful, flow from the free mercy of God, and are evidences of that paternal love, and of that gratuitous adoption on which their salvation is founded.<sup>7</sup>

There are two elements here that support ideas developed earlier in this study. At the end of the quotation above, Calvin speaks of the familial relationship that God intends to have with human beings. While there is not a direct link back to the creation of humankind in God's image in this text, it clearly reinforces the intention of God in terms of the "family" metaphor developed by Calvin in that connection. Calvin also highlights the sequence in which revelation and redemption stand. The promises "flow from the free mercy of God," that is, the gracious, predisposition of God, of which redemption is a major expression, and is the source of those promises. Out of the soteriological purposes and action of God flows the revelation of those purposes to humanity. A similar thought was eloquently expressed by Karl Barth in one of his early works:

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<sup>7</sup> CC vol 1 pp 406-407

This is what revelation means, this is its content and dynamic: Reconciliation has been made and accomplished. Reconciliation is not a truth which revelation makes know to us; reconciliation is the truth of God himself who grants Himself freely to us in his revelation. Revelation is reconciliation, as certainly as it is God himself: God with us; God beside us, and chiefly and decisively, God for us.<sup>8</sup>

Or, to put it in the words of Geerhardus Vos, “[R]evelation is the interpretation of redemption,” and “[R]evelation is so interwoven with redemption that, unless allowed to consider the latter, it would be suspended in the air.”<sup>9</sup>

This close connection between revelation and redemption issues from the identity of God, he is the one who both speaks and saves. The key biblical texts examined above (Ex 3 & 6, Hebrews) point clearly in this direction, and they are not unique in the canonical testimony. When the prophets attack the people for their disaffection, their allegiance to other gods, their barbs are aimed at two distinct elements lacking in the gods, but part of YHWH’s identity, these concern both words and works. While there is a clear word from YHWH, the gods are speechless, Deutero-Isaiah succinctly points to both of these things, saying, “If one cries out to it, it does not answer or save anyone from trouble”(Is 46:7). Adrio Konig observes that, “The silence of the gods is essentially related to their incapacity to save, to help, to rescue from trouble (Jer 2:27-28).”<sup>10</sup> Calvin comments on these verses that it is as if God is saying:

“I do these things, but idols cannot do them; they have no counsel, or wisdom, or understanding; they cannot give an answer to those that ask them, and cannot yield

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<sup>8</sup> K Barth, *God in Action* (New York: Round Table Press 1963) p 17

<sup>9</sup> G Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1975) p 6 and p 15

<sup>10</sup> A Konig, *Here Am I* (London: MMS 1982) p 28

any alleviation to the wretched.” In this comparison we ought to observe that he plainly shows himself to be God, first by the prophets and by their doctrine, and, secondly, by his works in a similar manner; and that nothing of this kind is found in idols, and that we ought to rely on him alone.<sup>11</sup>

Once again the link between both the words and the work of God, especially in salvation, as the speaking and saving God is clearly seen.

At the outset of this study the question, “What is speaking for?”, was posed, and the simplest answer that can be given is that by speaking a person announces both their presence and their desire for relationship. As has been seen, there has to a context in which that can happen, and any communication between God and human beings is possible because of God’s intention in creation to “make humankind in our image” (Gen1:26). It also happens because God accommodates himself to human capacity, so bridging the gulf between Creator and creature. Further his accommodation has a soteric intention, without which an appropriate relationship cannot be formed or maintained. This is at the initiative of God as he is both the redeeming and revealing God. There is communication in order that there might be communion, and the latter is the stimulus for the former.

In the course of this work a number of areas of study, worthy of further consideration have arisen. The Trinitarian aspects of the doctrines discussed is underdeveloped, the topics of revelation, redemption and particularly the *imago*, warrant further examination, the latter particularly so, due to the paucity of research on this aspect of it. Some further fruitful work on the image in relation to the Fall could also be undertaken. The nature of the rebellion in

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<sup>11</sup> CC vol 8 p 280

the garden, when those who are in the image of God are tempted to be “like God”(Gen 3:5) need further explication. There are ramifications for the doctrine of sin and the understanding of relationships both with God and with others. An aspect of the *imago* that has not been explored in this study is the possible link between humans being the image and having a *sensus divinitas*. This has implications not only for Calvin and his understanding of these two topics but in more recent uses of the *sensus* idea especially in reformed epistemology. Finally, although Calvin does make some links between the self-authenticating nature of Scripture, the testimony of the Holy Spirit and preaching, there is further work to be done in this area and on the practical implications that might impact the contemporary practice of the Christian Church.

## Abbreviations

<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary, DN Freedman ed</i> (New York: Doubleday 1992)
<i>CC</i>	<i>John Calvin's Commentaries</i> (Grand Rapids: Baker 1996) 22 vols
<i>CD</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1956-1975) 14 vols
<i>CNTC</i>	<i>Calvin's New Testament Commentaries</i> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1995 reprint) 12 vols
<i>DOTP</i>	<i>Dictionary of the Old Testament – Pentateuch, TD Alexander &amp; DW Baker eds</i> (Nottingham: IVP 2003)
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>IBHS</i>	<i>An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax, B Waltke &amp; M O'Connor</i> (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns 1996)
<i>Inst</i>	<i>Institutes of Christian Religion ed JT McNeil, trans FL Battles</i> (Philadelphia: Westminster 1960)
<i>Inst 1536</i>	<i>Institutes of Christian Religion 1536 ed, trans FL Battles</i> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1975)
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>ISJT</i>	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>NDT</i>	<i>New Dictionary of Biblical Theology TD Alexander &amp; BS Rosner eds</i> (Nottingham: IVP 2000)
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis WA VanGemeren ed</i> (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1997 5 vols)
<i>SBJT</i>	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>T&amp;T</i>	<i>John Calvin, Tracts and Treatises</i> (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 2009)

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